WORMWOOD

A short story by MaggotFace Klink

This story was originally dedicated to a good deal of people who no longer live, as such, I dedicate it to my wife whose very existence proves to me that this world can't be so bad, St. Vincent of Saragosa whose patience, story, and sangria I named after him inspires me today and carried me through the writing of this book, and for those dead people, the ones who weren't so bad: Vincent, Commando, and Isabelle. The pain you have all caused me is great, but not enough to diminish the warmth you have brought into my life all those years ago.
Habent requiem.

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"This is a story about people who like to waste time.
Waste my time, waste your time, waste their time.
But time is against them. Time is everyone's master.
Including them."
Death in June, 'Tick Tock'

MONDAY

As all great things do, it starts with a simple bassline.

"Moo I say. Moo." His massive horns sway from side to side as he shakes his head at me, and he speaks in exactly the same voice as the musician, Jason Williamson. I try not to focus too much on his heavy as sin accent and pronunciations, but I do apologize if I fail to ignore it. "Ya got a smoke, mate?"

"All I have are lights." My brain isn't working properly, all I can do is reiterate what I perceive to be reality. Thank you autopilot.

"Foine by me. Ya mind helping me light it? Haven't got thumbs on account'i the whole cow thing."

"Aren't you a bull?" I place a cigarette in between the wet flaps that are his lips and make a tent with my hands as I light it. He begins puffing away, gently rocking his head.

"Still got meself a pair of fat tits, mate. But nothing like a fuckin' dart is there?"

Whilst on autopilot I look down trying to see udders and surprisingly enough—they're there, dripping with bleach white milk. This cow seems to be different from all the other ones I see driving through dead end towns and wannabe-cowboy-yuppie hideaways, aside from the fact it talks of course, something about it feels so monumentally grand. So unimaginably ancient. Looking into its eyes it feels like holding the hand of a dying relative knowing full well the slimy bastard is going to outlive us all. It's like looking into the sun. Here long before there ever was an idea of me, and going to be here long after I've been forgotten. Maybe this is what those chickenshit cowards in those Lovecraft novels feel after seeing them bigass squid monsters. The bassline is now accompanied by a little drum pattern that I have no idea how to describe other than going:
Bom-badum-bom. Bom bom. Bom-badum-bom. Bom bom.

It bellows, "Got nothing to say now, huh? You think you're above this? Think I don't know about your lame fetish and how ya feel so naughty liking bondage?"

"What?"

“I seen your ugly ass soul.” It ashes with the cigarette still in its mouth, a well-rehearsed move If I may say so myself. “Unemployed and for what? Just to sit on yer ass wanking all day? Of course your broke ass wants to think free will exists. Means you won’t be punished doin’ all of this. But I think that’s worse. Means you got all the freedom you could want and ya spend it doin’ fuckall and bitching and moaning whilst your mates loathe your existence.”

It continues, “Yer a fuckin’ slug under the sun, and I hope someone pours salt on ya’ass. Maybe then someone will remember fast that this life is all you got. Everyday’s all we got. Today’s all you have and tomorrow might be naught.”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“There’s nothing like a fucking dart mate. Why be so obsessed with the idea of dying to go to heaven in the first place, when it’s a place on earth and it’s already in space? Tell me sumn,” It ashes once more, the ember creeping closer and closer to the ass like a tumor’s tentacles outstretched trying to grope a vital organ just as one finds the love of their life. “Let’s say all this was a simulation, how’s that make you feel?”

I pause for a second and think about it, how would I feel? “Don’t think it’d make much of a difference, don’t think I’d give a shit.” Simalcra and simulation or something like that, the book I’ve never read that I see people much smarter than me post every so often, among others.

It puckers its lips as it goes “Ooooo! Lovely answer. You would be correct! Jus’fa’that you can ask me whatever you’d like.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Information is currency, mate, ya ain’t got shit as is so best to be rich elsewhere.”

Fair. But there isn’t really anything I care to know truth be told. I try something simple, “What are the winning lottery numbers for tomorrow?”

“Ones you’ll never guess!”

Fucker. “Will I ever fall in love?”

"With yourself? Eventually. But even that prick Narcissius had to get a good true look at 'imself to really appreciate what was there. When you can do that, then ya just might."

A flash of lucidity hits me and I realize I'm speaking to a British cow, the surrealism of this being completely lost on me to the point that the strangest aspect is the fact that from what I know, cows have a bunch of stomachs so I wonder how nicotine even affects it, nausea stirs in the pit of my stomach. "Just who the hell are you?"

"Finally. I go by many names, mate. But for all intents and purposes I am the slayer of all men, the horror in the sky, devourer of young and old alike. That which waits for none, and defeats all. You wanna guess?"

"Am I supposed to know?"

"You may know me by my political form, Carthage. Bohemian Grove." It stands upon its hind legs and its front hooves deform into an outward facing palm. "I am...Mooloch! Ya get it? Mooloch?" It guffaws at its own joke while I am dumbfounded. Have I been here before? Is this reality? In a dream, one can only ever make bad decisions, in dreams they tend to just progress the absurdities onward—in nightmares is where it all goes to shit. "I am father time itself. That which waits for none, and devours all."

It lets itself down, "Ain't got nothin' ya want to know? Nothing at all?"

"Not really."

"Mate. You got the entire universe ready to be revealed to ya and ya'cannae'ven think of another question?"

"I kinda just take things as they come. I'm sorry." Why am I apologizing? "Uh...how's this week gonna go?"

"It's gonna be shit mate. Fucking shit. We've discussed your lack of employment I know but you'll be yearning for the end I'll tell you that right now."

"Wait." Fear overtakes me and I realize I am not in my body, "Don't cows only smoke menthols?"

Before I can say anything else or feel another smidge of anxiety, lightning strikes and explodes it into wet, hot chunks of flesh, and as I look into the sky I can see a choir of laughing faces

within the clouds all looking down upon me. I can see ancestors I never knew I had going all the way to the prehistoric and prehuman days, all weeping with disappointment and disgust, I replay this horrid dream as I stare into the foaming cloud of piss that stares back at me in my toilet as I shake my dick empty of droplets.

7:33AM

Back to bed I would go but as I lie beneath the blankets, that bastard star has other intentions. It's like pouring glow stick ooze directly into my corneas. Each sunbeam that peeks through my blinds is a traitorous collaborator, each one a subatomic Brutus. Through millions of miles their wicked mission remains the same, every Monday morning, far too early. Try as I might, I can't close my eyes hard enough. It's a cold blue blur outside, hazy smog dampens the solar blast that fills the sky but even this isn't enough, though it is appreciated. It's all a part of this grand conspiracy to make me want to stay in bed, paid off by Big Snooze, yet through divine intervention, my body stages a mutiny against its captain and throws what little blanket covers me to the side as my eyes surrender open, screaming mercy as they typically do. Out of my morning haze, I hear a low rumble, like thunder. Barely audible, but I think it's just tinnitus if it's not pouring outside.

On a calendar in my room lies a quote under a picture of a little french bulldog with a top hat and tiny bouquet of flowers, it says something about the journey of a million miles and how the most important step is the first or some shit about love, I can't remember exactly; the first step I take out of bed completely evaporates a cigarette butt on the ground. Never had a chance.

"God damn it."

I begin my day by slogging over to the kitchen and making some coffee, the act of which feels on par with all Herculean tasks. As it brews, I take out my phone to play some music, seeing a text from my best friend/business partner, Alan, saying to not forget about today. Unfortunately, the world didn't end this previous weekend and as a result, I still need to pay my share of the bills. That's a later worry though, the first half of the

day is me time, which is good because I have errands to run, in addition to doing some simple self care. I pour a spoonful of condensed milk in and whisk it carefully as I nod along to the song I'm listening to, making little clicking noises in place of lyrics. I switch on my stove, grab the nice nonstick pan with a grey stone look, and put it on the top right corner.

Nobody says, "And it's going to be a day, there is really no way to say—no to the morning." But the words sear into my head, whispered like commandments to a prophet within my folded gray matter. Weird. I think for a moment about what I want to eat, and decide on a breakfast scramble, chopping up bits of beef sausage and mixing it with egg. The aroma of searing meat first thing in the morning blitzkriegs into my nostrils, overpowering the smell of my home. I've whined so much about the sun I forgot to complain about how hungry I am. I try my hardest to keep my breakfast light but as I butter up some toast I realize that my inner voice that mouths off talking points from tabloid magazines will be left disappointed, spouting nonsense about wonder fruits and the real murderer of Jon Benet Ramsey all the while.

My breakfast finishes cooking as I grab a bottle of hot sauce, and another cup of coffee, and think about my oh so busy day ahead. Dissecting it as though I'll find another hour somewhere in there. I spent the night only getting three hours of sleep due to recent events and viciously masturbating, maybe that cow had a point. Something about the air in my mouth tastes like the week ahead will draw out too long. Like how some can smell the rain, I can sense the oracle foretelling of a week so ass, I can smell and taste it.

I keep the music playing as I eat from the porcelain bowl, occasionally dabbing the top of my pile with a napkin to try to make this healthier. Oh well, maybe I got time for a quick workout before I head out since the stores don't open for another couple hours. I look down at diced flesh and imagine that bull or cow or whatever digging in the grass and kissing its cow wife or husband and mud and of the farms that abused them before butchering them and wrapping them up for my convenience. Maybe they had names and were just sentient enough to love one another. How nice, I think, as I stab my pickings apart.

I stuff the last bits of sausage and sip the final drops of coffee, then throw my dishes into the sink, showering them all with dish soap and water. After being a responsible young man, I go into the restroom to do my usual morning routine. Nothing out of the ordinary today; I stare at my reflection as I brush my teeth and listen to an advertisement about pawn shops nearby. There are little bits of cheek hair poking out of my skin, my eyebags are heavy but my cheekbones look wonderful today, and my chin looks nice and sharp if I may be allowed to jerk myself off a bit. I don't even have any particularly troublesome pimples today. I throw some water into my hair, wash my face, clip the stubborn hairs, and just like that, I am a handsome young man equipped to tackle this week ahead, a real go-getter, a solid sonovabitch, I'm ready.

I go back into my room, do some squats, crunches, and the cat and (lord have mercy on me) cow yoga poses to improve the flexibility of my hips as to aid my sexual prowess, rocking back and forth on my knees and lying to myself thinking that it'll make me fuck better, if at all. The thought of sex reminds me that I only checked Alan's message, none of my other notifications, especially to see if I received anything from the target of my desire. This guy I talk to, not really that smart, but he has a great ass and a beautiful soccer build that's muscular but not overly so, and has a great sense of humor. Sure enough, he sent a message about how he hopes I have a good night and sent prayers for my dog, Anthony, who ran away a couple days ago.

Oh yeah.

I don't blame her, the world is waiting to be explored by those ignorant to every crack and fold within it, and the thought of her fat wrinkly self strolling along, mouth open, panting and shaking her little nub of a tail as she walks down eroded sidewalks with civilizations' histories stained onto them makes me smile, though I will miss her greatly should she never return. I would be immensely devastated to see her evaporated on the side of a road from a speeding truck or something. I hope that her explorations prove successful, perhaps she finds her own northern passage and goes down as one of the greats—though, if

I may be selfish, I just hope she finds her way home. This house is 900 square feet, but when it's just me, it feels too big.

Regardless, I sent a message back saying good morning and wishing him a nice day at college today. I have no idea what he's studying aside from that he's there on a soccer scholarship, but I do know that another girl who I shared a high school math class with also talks to him, meaning I need to step my game up as I don't want to share the attention. That's half the chances of success. Perhaps I need to post a tactical shirtless story.

About an hour passes of me doing low-intensity workouts, mainly just sitting on my low-rise bed and drinking water, wondering who might be buying today, occasionally checking my socials, and letting my mind run loose cooking up worst case scenarios for the week ahead. I check the news afterwards, seeing the usual stories making headlines: worsening economies, increase of murders and robberies, possible war around the corner, trillions of illegals bringing cannibalism and pestilence across the land, interspersed with advertisements about how Southern Bubbas Big as Fuck Fried Chicken just loves to worship Christ and is proud to announce that cheddar jalapeño biscuits are back for a limited time; an average day in the best timeline it seems. Some days it feels as though the universe is sentient enough to not like humans, and this is its way of giving us that god awful side eye.

Something that does catch my eye however is the story of increased police efforts in Southside following attempts of looting and rioting. I'm not sure if I'll be going there today, but just in case, I get my hoodie out. I contemplate my genius idea of bringing decoy bottles too, full of aspirin and shit to deals as casual as this. In my head it would be easy to lie about and explain away what I'm doing if I don't have any controlled substances on me. That and to also scam a stupid motherfucker, though dishonesty is a quick way to get done into dirt in this business and I've never actually done this before. I have no idea if it would work, in my head, it's soundproof logic.

I decide to have a morning smoke to begin my day, stepping outside onto the porch, sitting on the rocking chair, and seeing the little bits of turkey jerky I left out for Anthony have

been eaten, which gives me a small bit of hope she's near even though it was likely raccoons. I originally thought about having only a cigarette, but upon seeing a half-used pack of cigarillos, I indulge myself and think as my playlist keeps going. Rocking back and forth I wonder if I'll have a future, and more importantly if Alan filled his tank over the weekend since I hate paying for his gas. Life is good—and so am I. Exhale.

About fifteen minutes pass before I grab my bag, and start heading out, walking to a corner store first and grabbing a nice cold tea to keep me hydrated for today. An acne scarred man named Micheal is working today which is pretty nice, I haven't seen him in ages, always has a nice smile even if all he talks about is how much he hates his "stupid fucking job and life" and how much he wants to kill himself. I catch up with him, spill some gossip, ask about his girl, and carry on. Just as I'm about to leave, it hits me.

"Hey man, do you mind if I piss?" There is a palpable fear in my heart that I may not make it back home without incident.

He says nothing but hands me a little plastic cheese block with a key ring going through one of the holes. His eyes are glazed and bloodshot and within I can't see the ocean of repressed anger and violence bubbling under that in hindsight I would expect, and he looks to what I don't realize is the shittiest bathroom in America.

I unknowingly enter the single stall cell, and I see the true nature and soul of man. Piss puddles on the floor so that all the tiles are sticky, ponding around the drain and leaving it just a total fucking mess honestly, real hearts of darkness shit. The smell is the first thing I notice even before my shoes have to be peeled with each step, obviously it's piss and shit but it reminds me of hospitals—the way they stink of specifically stale piss that's soaked its way through a mildewy sponge ten times over. On the wall I see a library's worth of debate, swastikas mostly, dicks, a lot of sentences along the lines of "Sally sucks a good cock," and amongst all of this chaos, a poem written in blue marker:

"When it is raining,
I'm a sunshine kinda guy,
I stay complaining."

I dare not open my mouth to taste the air, but try as I might, it tastes of cheap ramen noodles soaked into the sponges they use to wash old people in hospitals.

As my shoes step into and out of puddles of dried piss trying to wade through to the crusted and spotted toilet—with ceramic chunks genuinely missing, I think that he who makes a beast of himself, is also rid the pain of being a man, but in that regard—what is left of he who would do so. Is there nothing worth saving in man? Is his heart truly full of primal savagery and violence the moment he is allowed freedom, if a catastrophic event capable of driving the whole of humanity to extinction were about to occur, would we be worth saving? As I look at feces streaks on the walls and shit stalactites hanging from the roof, I think not. Taking a high seat within the belly of the beast, I realize there's no sound within. There is no fan attempting futilely to make the smell more humane, the music from the store is completely muffled via the door like the soundtrack to a snuff film, and if it were any more quiet, I would hear the blood pumping into and out of this once white heart on rhythm with the great dance of all fools and devils.

Some days I wonder what the point of all this shit is—the earth I mean. Maybe the ideal life is one where the participant is so stupid they become blind to the ugliness as they cannot even comprehend how foul it is—as opposed to a life completely sheltered. I try to wash my hands, and give up upon seeing a condom in the sink. I respect the beasts of this land more and more each day. A dog wouldn't be too upset by this. It wouldn't go up to a tree carved out in hateful runes or shaped into a giant cross or hammer and sickle or swastika and think twice about pissing. To a dog, the tree is just that—there is nothing more to it, I wish I could have that sort of mentality when it comes to the earth. Alas, the earth is my place to live in and as such I must put up with these ungodly sights and smells and be faced with the fact that much like the perpetrators of the worst crimes, this too was done by mortal human hands. I reread the poem on the wall written in blue marker,

"I'm a sunshine motherfucker when it rains." I say to nobody.

The city seems dead, but I suppose that's to be expected since it is Monday and all. People go to work today, I think. I take a shortcut to my next destination, cutting through a nice neighborhood and am thankful I wore my pants today as the wind has come with a vengeance this morning. The sun has yet to fully peek out yet, and the cool blue blanket that covers the city today is extremely thick, as though the dawn were tucking us all in, giving a kiss on the forehead and whispering "Rest easy." I honestly wish I could, but the wicked are entitled to no rest I say, and I trudge on for another twenty minutes, finally arriving in the empty parking lot of this out-of-time, yet cozy sex shop I like to go to since, and I mean this in a young adult way and not a little kid way, but it makes me feel grown up. All these items specifically for sex with hot adults with jobs and whatnot, I imagine this is what the liquor store would feel like. No teenyboppers allowed practically painted up front.

I'm a little early, but the cashier, Carly, lets me in anyways, guess I'm a regular now. I smile her way to show my thanks, browsing the rental aisle as I usually do. Then I make my way to look at all the crazy looking dildos. At this store they have the craziest looking ones, they have CornCob-Cocks, Dragondicks, Damned Fucktoys (these are themed after demonic aesthetics, but their bright red color reminds me more of dogs) and accurate male pornstar penises, some of which even have their piercings modeled. I gaze upon these phallic effigies and do the mental math in my head to think about how much more I would need to be able to buy one of these, far too much to even daydream about it I realize, but I end up buying a rubber cock ring/tourniquet for $12.

She looks at it, then me and smirks, "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"Not really. You gonna show me?" I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips during my attempt at seduction. It fails disastrously.

She rolls her eyes, and points at a QR code and explains how it'll take me to a video tutorial. "My boyfriend sometimes uses these when he masturbates, he swears by these but I have

no idea if the crazy sex life you have will be changed by this." She says the latter half sarcastically.
"Funny. I think I'll be fine though, and hey maybe I'll find someone who's enlightened enough."
"Someone gay and—knowing you, into that weird shit? Happy hunting David." she giggles, her lip piercings swinging as she covers her mouth with her chain draped hands.

I walk back home to drop off my new toy, and see a letter placed on top of my chair that has my mother's name in bright red letters in a small window. I bring the letter in and leave it on the table since she could be home any minute. It gives a strange energy, and while I am not exactly superstitious, it definitely oozes a negative pulse from its small physical body like inside of it was a page from the Necronomicon—pages from the forbidden book used to write a toll fee most likely. It sits there, and as I leave the room I feel an ominous aura in my house now. Perhaps it's not too much of a stretch to say it's cursed, do people even do anthrax anymore? I don't even really know what that is, but I think it was a thing that people were scared of back when 9/11 was relevant.

I plug my phone into my charger as I do some very simple yard work. Picking up crushed cans, wiping down the mailbox, and taking out the trash, this all takes me about forty minutes with checking my phone every few. I'm in no rush.

I end up getting a bit too cozy after my chores and decide fuck it to the rest I had planned today, nothing really important, mainly just cleaning out my fridge since some of what I think are vegetables are squishy. Strange but whatever, the majority of today would've been spent doing that and by extension, the freezer. That and defrosting the chicken, which I do not neglect—making sure to get out enough pieces so that my mom and I get a breast each.

In bed, and in the moments leading to myself drifting to sleep, I curl up and stomp off my kicks ever so violently so that one hits my closet door, but that doesn't matter. Nothing really does now, in this moment I am calmer than anyone ever has been before, even the Buddha under the bodhi tree could not comprehend how free of suffering this one could be. I shiver and

shake a bit, before my shoulders finally untense, and I pass out, stepping into enlightenment for just a little nap. Blissful solitude wraps around me as I struggle to get the blanket on my feet, comforting me in a house so silent. I am unplagued by anxiety inducing cows and oblivion embraces me.

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but two hours go by in an instant. Eyes close, then open, I check my phone, and sure enough, it's time to start heading over to Alan's place, throwing everything back on, grabbing my Gold Saint Luke cigarettes, a singular joint, a lighter with a mangy mutt on it, and putting my earbuds back in, I start the journey west. He lives about forty minutes away, but by taking a shortcut walking on the highway for a bit, I knock about ten minutes off of that. It truly is a nice day, the sun is well in view, but obstructed by clouds, it makes the light bearable. I slow my walking speed for a moment to appreciate this gorgeous winter weather. Even in the harshest month of the year, January, the frost hasn't been too bad, can't imagine any plants dying from this at least, the little blades of grass and weeds are still a bright mixture of dried greens and yellows, with only little spots of pale kisses on them.

As I walk on I like to imagine myself as a brave knight on a heroic journey—trudging through the swamplands of InterstaTen to see my beloved princess. A greasy Mexican man who's likely not awake. Oh yes, I can see it now.

"I'm here to see the wizard." I would say to the gatekeeper.

He replies, "O', he who sits in the great oaken tower?"

"Yes. He holds the princess hostage to use her for his evil, wicked, dark powers."

"Gods above." He would do the Christian gang sign, whatever it's called, "Be strong, valiant knight, do not let his corruption spread into the light!"

Unfortunately, I walk on his road for a while before I see the silhouettes of these cave dwelling knuckle dragging assholes that reside here and demand a troll toll. They're parasites honestly. Led by this slobbering bastard named Abraham who hates my guts. Sure enough, he and his gang of strays are in the way, guarding the only path to Sherman Street that doesn't

involve going through someone's backyard. He sees me well before I see him and greets me with a smug look, knowing full well I have to play along in his act of ignorance. The folds on his face multiply as he grows a dog-like grin, his mouth is adorned with silver, gold, and accented by blackened gums, and he gets off of his shitbox.

Accentuating the first word very loudly to assert himself, like this is his first time cussing, "Fuck you doing here?"

It's obvious he wants me to say something specific, I can only guess what ridiculous excuse he's cooked up to hassle me, but I'm trying my best to not say some 'Prithee bee, thou troglodytic scum, I come to see the wizard. Fuck off.' type of shit.

"Just passing through, I got a quest to do today." God damn it.

"Oh, through here? Well, I hope you didn't forget that we got a stranger's fee."

I should rip into him right now with an explosion from my rotator cuff, with energy transferred into the blast of my knuckles into his weak, pimpled jaw. I should kill him before he can even react. Reach into his belly and rip out his guts, show them to him before he hits the ground with a loud thud as though I am David of bygone years and he my Goliath. From his bloated corpse I would pull out Excalibur and use it to purge this land of evil. Alas, I am not strong enough, and this is not that serious.

"I ain't paying just cause you're here. I come here almost once a day."

"I ain't seen you once, any of you's seen this prick before?"

His loyal pack all shake their heads, all of them looking like purebred dogs in a sense that they, all in a way different from the rest, look uniquely inbred, just ready to bite the skull of a small child from the slightest provocation.

"Sorry man looks like you gotta pay up. Just how we keep out any criminals from this oh-so-nice neighborhood."

I roll my eyes, and my sleeve up, sliding out a $10 bill from my arm stash, and slam it into his soft and oily palms.

"Fucking dickhead." I tell him and try to straighten my posture, he pushes me through, and tells me to be polite, flashing his very real gun that he holds in his belt.

Honestly, despite how much I hate Abe and his pack of mutts, I do wish my street had that, far as I know, this is a pretty safe area, not that I'm scared, just would be nice to not worry about burglars and rapers whenever I get cozy. A real gun of my own would be a smart investment too, but I worry I'd get a little too faded and play with what I shouldn't. Despite dealing with that slumlord and his lackeys, the rest of the walk, all seven minutes of it, goes swell. Alan's house stands out from all the others that almost blend together in uniformity, it murmurs out negligence since the dead grass and littered yard are the biggest indicators of him. I put my earbuds in my bag, and ring the doorbell. The screen door is open and his car is out front, which is the strongest indicator that he's home since he's scared of driving, hence our partnership. I wait for a minute. Already feeling awkward, I put my hands into my hoodie pocket, and a moment later, his older sister answers the door.

"Good Morrow fair lady, I come bringing neither good tidings or blessing, but the ruin of many a modern man. Hark, d'ost my weary princess await me proper?"

"The fuck do you want David?"

"Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave I am, where are my manners? The one known as Alan, that is the one I seek."

"He's still sleeping," she moves the hair in her face, tucking a strand behind her ear, with a silver chain around the upper lobe now in view.

"Perchance to dream, guess I'm gonna have to go wake my little gimp up then, lest he make me scream."

"You gonna do that?"

I nod my head violently and with my mouth agape, grunt out "Uh huh."

"He's gonna be pissed." Her eyes betray her attempts to delay and I know she just doesn't want to hear our usual routine. I scoff, "He won't be when he wakes up to my beautiful face right in front of him, his handsome knight."

She opens the door and beckons me to take my shoes off inside the house.

"That or he'll start the day throwing up last night," She realizes her accidental rhyme and immediately adds, "He got shitfaced with Jesse." She makes her way back to her couch.
I shrug and smile as she double takes.

"Did you forget to do your hair today? Looks like shit."
I actually did but I ignore that.

"Thanks Yez," I shut the door, "His usual spot?"
She sits back down on the red couch in the center of the living room, and unpauses her movie, some ultraviolent orgy from the 90's and picks up her phone. "You know it."

I give a thumbs up, her mind already elsewhere, and walk towards the hall, but I stay a bit and eavesdrop on her world/videocall .

"It was my brother's friend coming over, nothing else."

A garbled voice is discernible from the sounds of bodies being hacked up for barbecue. "Lame. Do you still have to go to work today?"

"I don't have to go walking door to door but Brittney said she still wants me to do callbacks until two."

"Damn that sucks. The world ended and they're literally expecting you to just clock in?"

"I know. She said that we have the chance to brighten people's days, reminding them that they didn't say 'No soliciting' three months ago. I need a new job."

"You could work with us. Fatima got taken."

"Aw really? We were supposed to get coffee this weekend."

I rub a little bronze buddha's belly on the mantle for good luck today on the way towards the chamber. I crack open his door and am attacked by the flurry of smells in here, a combination of fast food, weed, air freshener, and cologne if I'm not mistaken. Being careful to not accidentally walk into any of the various kettlebells on the floor, I tiptoe to the right side of his bed where his shirtless and tubby body lies.

"Baby...time to wake up..."

I make kissy noises as I nudge his arm, and begin to violently shake him.

"Alan baby..."

Still dead.

"Wake the fuck up."

He murmurs.

I shake him harder.

"Aye! Get up." I deliver a small smack across the back of his head.

"What?"

"We got shit to do today, 'member?"

His eyes are crusted shut, but he's also forcing them to stay closed as he fights to the death to sleep more, "So?"

I pull the blankets off of him, despite his strength advantage over me, I have the element of surprise and reveal that he's only wearing boxers and yellowing socks.

"You're a fucking prick, you know that?" He mumbles.

I smack his head with a light slap again.

"Get up. C'mon."

"Fuck your mother."

He murmurs and yawns some more before shifting out of his fetal position, doing some shoulder stretches before getting off his bare mattress.

"Laundry day?"

"You know it," he says, eyes still closed, hunched over, "You want some?"

He pulls out his water bottle, I reply no, and he quickly swigs all that was left before getting up and walking to his bathroom. I sit on the bed as we talk about the week ahead. His loud pissing makes it hard to hear all he says from down the hall. It is as though he has a shotgun in there.

"Hey, what are we gonna get up to today?"

I hear his loud yawn from afar as well as his toilet lid slamming.

"I'll tell you in the car, by the way, wanna grab some lunch tomorrow?"

"Eh, I dunno, I got shit to do."

"We could grab breakfast."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah. You're getting groceries right? Tuesday?"

"You know it."

"Hell yeah, breakfast it is—toss me a shirt, por favor."

I rummage around in his small pile of yet to be washed shirts in his basket and chuck a somewhat dusty gray thermal and fixate on his rosary that his grandma made. He takes it out of storage every time he has a crisis of faith and swears himself to Christ before going back to viciously masturbating and drinking and smoking various drugs. Seems a bit pointless now, recent events and all. The golden chain that holds a small jeweled cross shines in the bits of sunlight that invade the room, and it looks to be swaying on itself. I assume that the ruffling and pained sounds of labor implies he's putting on pants which means I don't have to look at his elephant-like legs anymore.

He walks out of the bathroom, shuts off the light, and gives a thumbs up.

"You say hi to the wizard?"

"Who do you think let me in?"

"Perfect pardnar', let's get rolling then, you know what time it is."

He throws me his keys, and we walk to the driveway, tell Yesennia goodbye, and in unison say we love her, with a peace sign as her response and a muffled giggle on the other end. We climb into his beige SUV, he plugs his phone into the aux and I ask what's been on my mind all day:

"What's the move today?"

"Single sale for pills, decent move, and a few stops for joints, just some freshmen. Gordey's the big fish."

Even if I tried, which I do not, I can't hold back the tidal wave of disdain and genuine disgust that rises above the village's skyline and smashes into all that ever was before. As Neptune calls his forces back to the depths, they leave behind nothing but salted foam and seaweed nooses in their path amongst splintered churches and demolished family homes.

"Him? I fucking HATE HIM. God damn it." I clench my face in my hands as this is genuinely bad news. With only one name my day has been ruined, I feel dread flowing through each mile of my veins, not fear of harm, but of the pure unpleasantness

I know today will now have. My eyes squint not from themselves but from my nose tensing up and nostrils flaring.

"Oh don't be such a baby, goodness, he's not that bad y'know."

"I really don't like Gordey dude, I'm not gonna bullshit you." There are several reasons for this. The most apparent and popular one is that he's what's been universally recognized as a raving lunatic. That's not even to be mean, there's several guys I know who also scream about the end times and how the Clinton's have infiltrated the outer layers of the universe's mesh in order to watch over hell for their sick amusement, yet they float above him in status due to how he handles that notoriety. The most hated aspect of him is the fact that he's an 'unironic rape apologist' not to mention the fact that any time I tried talking to him prior he would eventually bring up how gay men are the result of molestation and that all homosexuals are deeply involved in the rape and abuse of young boys. I could spend hours listing off all the reasons I do not like to be in his putrid aura but in all honesty though, I hated him before I knew and experienced all that. He's incredibly unfunny, annoying, and so damn weird, among other things. I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out he was one of Osama's goons and contributed a few silver pieces to the snitchin' on Jesus fund.

"C'mon man, you know he's good for it."

"Is there literally anyone else looking to buy? I'd take Bri over him."

"Nope. Looks like you gotta mount up."

I slouch in my chair for a moment, I'll admit I'm overreacting with this, but damn man, I really don't fucking like the guy. Oh well, not everything could go my way today, play the cards I'm dealt I guess. I sit back up. My sails doing their best to gather wind as I inhale.

"Alright, his place or what?"

"Nah he wanted to meet out back by the nice Lenny and Sons', says his mom installed cameras or some shit all over his house."

"What's Lenny and Sons'?"

"A family restaurant."

"Okay but where is it?"

"Southside foo."

"No shit?"

"Yep. With all the cops running around it apparently."

"How do you know that? I thought you were sleeping all day."

"It's been like that for a week, David, maybe watch the fucking news sometime, and just so you know, I am on aux."

"Fine."

He lights up and quickly types his usual metal mix in, while it loads he puts his seatbelt on. The drive to Southside is usually about 25 minutes, however the traffic on the way is much lighter and we get more green lights, making us exactly 4 minutes early for today's deal. Clothes litter the streets and fill ditches, on the way I see someone sifting through piles of abandoned vêtements looking for something. The birds in the sky fly east, and grey battleships swirl in a suicidal spiral in the sky, towards the great unknown.

Something I forgot is that behind this family restaurant is a long stretch of an alleyway that is shrouded by the shadows of linked fast food and service stores. It's not exactly a dingy place but I wouldn't want to walk alone here at night, though clearly there are some braver than me judging by the amount of tagging on the wall. Dicks and swastikas paint the walls, with tags and portraits trying their best to make the argument that this is art. At least I have Alan to protect me, the big bastard he is. I didn't even realize, I hadn't asked him where his real bottle of pills was, I bring it up to him and while he's bobbing along to a metal song about fucking one's sister and poverty, one of the better ones, he taps the glovebox and makes clicky noises with his tongue. There's that worry settled I suppose, I put my jar beside it for safe keeping. We park along the west entrance to this spot, as it's much less easily-accessible and as discussed it would help in case things went sour to have the car on the far end.

Eventually, Gordey shows up from the east entrance, in a camo jacket and all black everything else, his brown hair all curly and greasy, and his shoes filthy with water stains. There's no way he's ever getting better. I know that's a mean thing to say but I

guess not everyone can make it, anyone can, but it's almost hilarious just how unfortunate he looks. He approaches us, looking behind every now and then. I have a sinking feeling in my stomach, but I'm not thinking I have to bring out The Piece.

"Hey fellas, how're we today?"

"Okay."

"Good good, you got it all?"

"Yeah, do you?"

"Of course, here, I ain't lie."

That itself is a lie, he actually tried giving a counterfeit bill to Ruben Espino last month for a few joints and got his head kicked in, even today I can see exactly where his face got stomped. Nonetheless, he hands us a crisp Benjamin, I have Alan check it out.

"Don't worry man, it's real. I ain't gonna try anything with yous."

Alan takes his time checking it, and I notice the ink of the 100 doesn't shift colors.

No fucking way.

Almost instantly, I meet Gordey's eyes and I explode. A moment later, I'm already in his face as Alan barely catches on that there's a big "FOR MOVIE USE ONLY NOT LEGAL TENDER" in hot pink on one side. I throw him on the asphalt and slap him so hard it echoes. Alan takes the bottle of pills back as I shake him down, screaming in his face and threatening some pretty heinous shit even by my standards. I get a little carried away and start kicking him down, his soft cries turn into wails as he starts begging us to stop, and apologizes profusely. He still hasn't given up any real legal tender so I decide to bring the nuclear option out of the glovebox: The Piece.

The Piece is this jury rigged to hell 3D printed "gun" that I'm half sure would explode should I fire the one bullet it can hold. It's a modified model that could in theory fire a .45 ACP compared to the usual smaller size, I have no idea if it actually would, but to Gordey it's all the same, and as I put the not so cold—plastic tip against his forehead he freaks out and finally gives up a real wad of 20's. Alan motions for me to step aside so he can give him the pills.

"Nah."

"But he paid."

I run my fingers along the top of the piece.

"He also tried to rip us off, he's lucky he ain't dead. I be killing motherfuckers."

I'm just trying to act tough, I have no idea if I'm even doing a good job, one voice crack and this is all over. I walk back to the car and Alan follows. The last I see of Gordey is him curled up in a ball, sobbing in a puddle that's likely to be more piss than rainwater.

We exit out onto the street and make our commute onto the freeway, we're struck silent with awkward guilt and for a moment, all that is audible is the distant sound of cars coasting along. No music, just the purr of his car at 80 down a nearly empty lane, the occasional deserted car on the sides or in the way, but nothing crazy, the cleanup has been thorough I guess. I slow down a bit and ask if some music is alright. He says nothing, but his frown is evident that he at least wouldn't turn it off immediately, I plug my phone in and press shuffle, instantly one of our favorite songs kicks in, Ballad of a Menace, I nudge him in the shoulder as I begin rapping along. He stays silent.

"What's wrong man?"

I turn it off and slow the car down, worried that he's mad at me. Pieces of broken glass and evidence of quickly spent frustration are scattered all over the road, little fragments of the riots and outbursts for the fools who didn't get to go, the sidewalks are mostly abandoned. As I drive I see the occasional pilgrim on their trek, one of them carries a large cross on his back. His walks barefoot and leaves behind spots of blood, the cross is composed of scrap metal and rope–it almost resembles some kind of IED but even then, he looks stonecold serious. He's grinding his teeth together, slobbering with each step and red in the face, but admirable as this may seem—fucking thing is on wheels. Seems like cheating to me admittedly.

"Do you ever think about what we do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like the impact we have. Where we're going."

I swear I'm not calling my friend stupid but I'm not used to him saying shit like this, this is genuinely on par as if my dog were to somehow start speaking to me about existentialism.

"I mean, we're still making money dude. I don't think it's much of a problem."

"Not that. Like what do we contribute to the world other than supplying junk? I know he's crazy but Gordey needs genuine help, man."

"Fuck him man. He's lucky I ain't paint the walls with his brains and let the archangels take him to the Louvre as a modern art statement on the fate of many a dumb motherfucker."

"You don't know him like I do, I remember when he was just a weird kid. Wanted to be a marine biologist back then, or a marine I think, shit man, I dunno. I feel awful for this, he's really not well."

"Think of it this way," I swerve to avoid ramming an empty minivan's rear that lies gently on the shoulder of the road, "How is this supposed to be our problem? Ain't we just trying to get by? Last I checked, neither you or I were psychologists. I ain't his keeper." The thing that bothers me most is that I don't really think any of this, I just try not to think about this or the people I hurt or the deeper implications of doing what I do. In theory—most people we sell to at least have a dependency, or can't afford to get a real perscripription. Most long running customers are buying smaller and smaller amounts, looking worse every time, save for one frat guy named Chris who I'm sure just sells our shit for more upstate laced with who knows what.

"I guess so. I dunno, I just know that I can't keep doing this forever. Eventually it's gonna catch up with us."

"I don't know about that, but in any case, we got anything else today?"

He immediately switches his tone, "Just a few kids to peddle dope to, you wanna hang out after?"

I think about it for a moment, not really doing much today other than probably washing my sheets for this week since my mom gets mad at me otherwise. That and potentially redoing my nails since it's starting to chip, I'll probably add on some clear coat, I hear that helps. Sheets and clothes are all I've got to do,

and I make a mental note to exert all my energy into trying to remember—even though I will very likely forget.

"Eh, sure, do you?"

"Of course I do, my sister should be off the computer if you're down to keep playing modded GLOOM."

I enthusiastically nod and drive around to the usual spots. A couple kids and some teenagers, nothing unusual, they typically buy from us just because they don't know how to roll for themselves. It's a shame really, I grind this blend with mullein tea to stretch it out. Seven dollars a joint and it's laced with herbs. The strange nature of selling to children is not lost on me, but I blame their parents too much to ever take full responsibility. We are but humble merchants that feed the ever growing beast known as market demand, for if not us–then another would. This other may be just as morally lost as we, but he may also choose to lace the youth with worse than just tea. As I said, if not us–then another.

On the way over to his house I remember I have my phone on silent, and make a mental note to check it for notifications as soon as we park. Of which there are none new, aside from promotion emails but that doesn't count. A bit of a sting to the ego, but the day is still moderately young at 4PM so I don't sweat it.

Yez has moved from the couch to the table, on closer inspection she's just window-shopping chairs on her phone. I ask her why and she says she just wanted to see what was out there, she says she wants to move in with her friend Nana soon. That name is familiar.

"Which one was Nana?"

"She's tall, acrylic nails with all the shit on them."

"The one that called you a fat ugly bitch?"

She rolls her eyes in a "Yeah that one," kind of way.

I acknowledge her with, "Kinda rude." And I get nothing back, further making the silence unbearable. Seconds pass and neither her or I say anything, we just sit and stand (respectively) in a tense idle animation, waiting for the other to say anything.

I tear the veil, "So...how's the script writing?"

"Screenplay." Instant relief fills the room, the timebomb just out of view freezes on the one second mark and the little fat white Protestant orphans are saved.

"How's the screenplay writing going?"

"It's good." She nods and looks away as though she's reading this interaction off a teleprompter. "I rewrote a lot of the beginning."

"How come?"

"I started writing it when I was like eighteen, some of it definitely seems like an eighteen year old girl trying to be cool wrote it."

"Like?"

"I had a few one liners, some unnecessary scenes, and just a bunch of stupid metaphors that didn't need to be there that are gone now. It's better. It might actually sell."

"Oh shit. Well, try not to forget about us when you make it big in Hollywood then yeah?"

"The minute I sell it, I'm thinking of getting a restraining order on you and selling Alan to the cartel."

"Ooo," I can't help but laugh as I say, "Make sure to sell him as a prime gape-slave, worth more that way."

She laughs, I laugh. A successful, not that weird conversation has been had and I can happily make my way past her.

I grab a bag of pretzels and sit down with Alan, popping open the bag and pouring it into a bowl that sits upon the desk. It reminds me of when I would do this sorta play date with another friend who isn't around anymore. We would sit around after school playing video games for hours and cussing to each other. Back then I remember feeling like such a badass just for saying Hell in hushed whispers so as to not let my mom catch me while we mowed down dozens of zombies and demons in a zealous manner; nowadays I can get away with saying shit every blue moon and I'm playing the same game on arguably older hardware but with increased gore and dozens of new weapons. I miss that friend sometimes, I bet he would have shat his pants seeing this.

A few hours pass before I realize it's already starting to get dark and I bid my goodbyes, they both offer to drop me off at

my place but I decline, saying something about how I want to pick up some food on my way home and that I wouldn't wanna buy them anything. Before I leave, Alan and I split today's profits, 60/40 his favor. After this and making it to the edge of the street, saying hey to the third shift of neighborhood watchdogs I'm more friendly with, I walk at a slow pace home. Not like I'm sad, I'm just lost in thought about everything today. A mixture of trying to calculate profits and also justifying how we probably did not help princess Gordey, though I like to imagine that I will not have to see him for a good while. Still, I dunno.

As for profits, we managed to get a decent price and keep the almost 15 tablets and sold twenty joints total, which if I know right equals a net profit of like $340 or so. My thinking is that profit equals revenue minus costs, so negative negatives plus the joints, $340. Regardless, good day for our wallets. While walking I check my phone again and see that I actually did get a message from my little man crush earlier on in the day. I open it and chat with him a bit. After a bit, I ask if he'd like to go get some lunch on Thursday, to which he says and I quote:
"Sure."

I guess today was a good day in all honesty. Despite everything, I'd say all is well. I ended up not getting anything to eat on the way home, instead making myself a nice pair of pineapple grilled cheese sandwiches with slices of chicken in them. Usually I'd have come home to my mother cooking, but I guess she's still not back, which is fine, I can survive on my own quite well in all honesty. I make sure to make her a few sandwiches too and leave them in the fridge, a little bit of hot sauce on them as well. Just how she loves. I sit down in the living room and click through the channels on TV, eventually landing on some cartoons.

As I eat and watch my shows, I get hit with a draft that makes my skin crawl. In only a moment I think about my divine right to the title Lord of the Game and ponder upon that, basically—thinking about where I'm from, where I'm going, and more importantly—where I'm at. I am lit by blue lighting, watching a show meant for people my age and stoners, drinking ice water and sitting on a leather couch. I live in a one story home, in a

neighborhood that is slowly dying. As it is, my mom and I are some of the only people on this street. When I was a kid, back in the days of anthrax fueled paranoia, this neighborhood was almost overpopulated. Cars were parked all over, making it hard to drive two ways, kids would play and run around and start little fires, and old men would sit outside at night drinking and smoking, listening to oldies, which is not to say the sounds were always pleasant, those were just the nice sounds that would fill the street, now it's just silent. Just as much as there was life, so too was there the violence that comes in tandem with it. Domestic abuse, gunshots, sirens, dogs baring teeth for territory, the symphony of this neighborhood is as much one of destruction as it is of beauty. Perhaps the two could exist as one some day, but here, it exists in the forms of barred windows, shot neighborhood watch signs, and fields where homes once stood. It's a cute idea that the poor folk of the world unite when the rich man's not looking and come together singing Mumford and sons or some folk shit like that. All I can really say on this, with my lack of knowledge in economic theory and solidarity, is crabs in a bucket. Crabs do not normally form in buckets, but when found within, they become rotten sons of bitches that willingly drag others down to ensure that they will not die alone. It's not enough that I starve and can't chase my dreams, everybody else must die in obscurity; tattered rags and emaciated children will litter the streets as a cold front sweeps through and executes all these criminals, given socially permissible death sentences in order to better feed The Beast.

There's a drug dealer that lives down the street, right now he is texting a girl too young for him messages that are too explicit for someone her age, not that she cares, he sometimes gives me weed in exchange for my papers, but aside from him, there's only two other families that tend to keep to themselves. Most of the families that lived here either moved or got foreclosed on, their houses eventually being demolished and turned into shortcuts to the store. It's a slow death for this place, as though we are a cancer and the economic stranglehold is a chemotherapy, it's not like I'm that attached to the identity of this place. The more common fate for someone in my rung in the

ladder is the slow death; climax and closure are a luxury for the bourgeoisie, action heroes, and pornstars.
For where I'm going, I do know that I'll definitely want to have a genuine job by this time next year. Maybe something in retail or a sweet warehouse gig, who knows, maybe even a job at a gas station. Cleaning the joint at my pace, meeting all sorts of characters, might check that out honestly; I shut the window letting in that breeze and my mind slows. I exhale for the first time in what's felt like minutes, but in reality has only been a few seconds.

I stay up a little bit, lying on the couch, draped in one of the blankets we keep in the closet. I'm not paying attention to this sitcom that's now playing, truth be told I'm just missing my mother. She usually isn't gone for this long, and with recent events I'm worried for her. Though she's tougher than I am, and always keeps this pepper spray keychain on her in addition to always packing a real gun that shoots real bullets that would kill someone for real so I'm sure she's fine. This puts me at ease, and after dozing off a bit on the couch, I decide to call it at 1am, head to my room and pass out. The TV in the living room is the only noise in the house to make me feel safer, its blue light being visible even from my room.

Within moments, the world blurs together in a wash of light and dark blues, the wind bangs on the walls outside and the world carries on. If it were to end, I don't think mine necessarily would. I would hope that it goes both ways. Overnight, a massive wildfire began in california. It's not much worse than how it typically is when the entire state is set alight from whatever causes that, though it's out of season which prompts an address from the governor to ban public smoking and propose felony charges for people who litter during dry months.

TUESDAY

I wake up around 7 am, to silence and darkness. I feel sticky and sweaty, probably since I didn't shower yesterday. I head over to my bathroom and clean myself, using a lot of my citrus and mahogany blend body wash to get the grime off. I do my usual strategy of getting the water hot enough to steam and soaking in that, and then immediately turning it cold, feels like fucking heaven. After washing my hair, I dry off and try to dress up in something clean. I forgot exactly when I was gonna start laundry this weekend, but in all honesty I should do it today. Still, my hemmed band tee and black skinny boy pants are a solid look, especially with my hi-tops that I plan on wearing today. I flex a little in the mirror before putting my shirt on, trying my absolute hardest to find some muscle.

I roll up and head to the porch to smoke, with my slippers on my feet and phone in my hand, I'd have expected nothing crazy. But as I open the door my heart bolts out of my chest and I almost drop my phone just from the sheer shock. Anthony came back. Her fat ass on the concrete floor of the porch, completely passed out and snoring. All her folds in view for the world to see. I smile widely and drag her inside, she's a little lighter than I remember, but I'll make sure she's fed before I indulge myself with anything.

I drag her by the collar and she stays limp like a corpse. I'd be worried that was true if I couldn't hear her snoring, which puts me at ease. I completely forgot I was going to go smoke, and in all honesty I don't even really want to anymore. I put my joint in this little valentine's mailbox—I've had it for years, and it's where I keep a magazine catalogue's worth of illegal drugs, including three tabs of LSD.

I originally had four which together made a picture of The Cat in the Hat with spiral rainbow eyes, I remember asking the girl who hooked me up why she does that. Apparently those with Dr. Seuss shit on them are her high grade material, high dosage and quality. Interesting but more than anything. I imagine she looked up trippy images and just put that shit out to overcharge suckers like me, $60 for 4 tabs, a ripoff.

Nonetheless, I start thinking about my first and probably final trip, and before I know I'm back in that headspace. I was kinda a fucking idiot with it admittedly, no sitter, no prep, didn't even test it, so yeah a bit of the blame is on me. Though, I think the main reason shit went so bad was cause my dad still lived with us and I was terrified that at any moment he would walk into my room and catch me. Instantly freaking out and looking into the mirror, I realized there was no way I could convincingly fake sobriety so I just stayed in bed, watching anime trying to not be scared dickless. As evidenced by the fact that I'm still alive today, he didn't barge in, apparently my mom kicked him out after an argument early on in the night so I was terrified over nothing. Still though, never been that anxious in my life, I remember the come down being just dreadful too. Staring at my wall as I lay in silence, shaking and being paralyzed with fear that at any given moment I might get caught. The anime didn't help either, honestly just made me confused and scared too which is funny since I understood it before then just fine, but I dunno. That was like two years ago so the details are a bit hazy, but the fact that I remember how I felt so vividly is reason enough that I won't be doing that again any time soon.

While in my room, I get the makeshift bed for Anthony, some pillows and blankets in a short white laundry basket, her little slice of Heaven. I squat to pick her up, and struggle a moment to lift and drop her gently in there, despite my shaking, she's as comfortable as she could be, moving her head and grunting. I smile, and sit with her in my living room in silence. Not exactly thinking about anything, just enjoying the moment with her. The woman of the house until my mom comes home. I'd be lying if I didn't say that lingered at the back of my mind. She's never stayed out this long, and it's not like her to just come home and go to work silently. My mind races as I imagine the worst case scenarios, half of which involve my dad, but I don't wanna think about him. Still, Anthony's soft snoring helps to ease me, as I think justification for her staying out this late. She has been hanging out with her friends a lot lately, drinking a little more and meeting men from what she tells me when I give her shit for coming home late, but as I try telling myself she's with her

girlfriends, doubt creeps in. Its tendrils enveloping my reasoning and bringing it down, drowning it within its own liquids. I can't help but worry about her. She's tough I know, but fuck man, I'm lonely as hell, and I don't want to sound like a bitch, but I love my mom, a lot actually.

I get up and start reheating the sandwiches in the fridge. My mind tends to go crazy when I'm just in silence, without stimulation. The sizzling and searing is enough to occupy my mind, and either that or the smell is enough to wake Anthony from her slumber. She climbs out of her basket onto her stubby little legs and speed walks over to me. Her little tail wagging with every step as she does a little hop and circles around in excitement. This intensifies when I pour some grease we have in a jar into her dry food, though doing this makes it hard to tell if she's eaten as of late, since she always loves it when I do this. Just to make sure she's happy I mix in some wet food too, even dicing it up with the can much to her enjoyment, I don't remember her being able to jump this high admittedly. I smirk at this, and yawn ever so slightly, enough that I'm convinced I should go back to sleep as I watch her happily devour her breakfast, scratching her ass all the while.

I crawl into bed, mind still racing, and drift off. I sleep for about 2 hours until I wake up again, now my day can officially start. I put on my gray work jacket, hi-tops, earbuds, and head out for Alan's. I'm in a jazzy mood, and spend the walk listening to various New York rappers, dancing and doing weird shit with my hands to the beats and lyrics, all the while I'm reminded that I did not do my laundry yet again. Whatever. The weather is slightly gloomier today, and the breeze is a bit more forceful. The clouds hang low and seem to be put in place to stop another event like the last from happening, in perfect unison so as they boot out the entire sky, yet some sunlight pokes through so that it's not all damp and gray. Rays of warmth break through this great sift and land upon my face, my nose specifically feels kissed by Apollo.

Nonetheless, I walk, I spit up $10 silently, get to Alan's and find that, as uncommon as it is, he's awake this time. Already dressed too. He answers the door in his shorts and blue hoodie, I always forget how dwarfed I am by him with his 6'8 status until

there's a bit of a height difference and I see him straining his neck to look down at me. He locks his door and tosses his keys, already we're talking about dumb shit and giggling.

We drive to a nearby diner that used to be an Asian buffet called LouieLui and park close to the restaurant which itself is in a mixture of commercial buildings, a gas station, and a hotel across the street. We sit inside at a booth and continue our conversation:

"You can't just say Wu-Tang and put them in your top 5, that's a total cop out." I say.

"I don't think so, they're the sum of their parts, and I think that's a solid answer."

"No, that's like 9 different people I think."

"Okay, but like they're all my number 4 together, some of them are better than the others though I won't lie."

"Well who's your favorite Clan member?"

"That's tough man I can't say that off the top of my head, maybe my least favorites though." He looks to the side, deep in thought.

I rush him, "Well?"

He hums, and finally lets his answer loose, "Probably Ol' Dirty Bastard. I do not fuck with him."

Blasphemy. Awful take. "Ain't no way you just said that."

"I ain't down with ODB man, my bad."

"That's literally my number one. His flow is unmatched, have you even heard his solo albums?"

"No."

"That's why then, listen to Protect Ya Neck 2 and then tell me if ODB is your least favorite again."

He shrugs and looks at me in a way that says that within the next 60 years of his life, he will literally never put aside the four minutes it takes to listen to it, mountains will be reduced to dust, hell will freeze over, and all life in the universe will end from heat death before he listens to it, "Alright man, alright."

We're sitting across from each other, though honestly with how dead the restaurant is I feel like we could both have a table each and be stealing from nobody. The light that hangs over us is close to his head, but brightens our table enough so that not

a spot on it is dark. The general and mediocre design of a breakfast focused diner is lost on me, but I don't come here for thrilling interior design. If anything, I come here for the calm atmosphere which has been aided by recent events surprisingly enough, as now there's no birthday celebration early in the morning with mormon parties of 12 or so. I'm pretty sure it isn't like this everywhere, but I do wonder how it really is since no one's talking about it online. Sorta just something no one wants to mention, not like I blame them, it's uncomfortable to even think about. Especially considering I bet a lot of religious people feel cheated, I've seen them thinking that this was something called the rapture. Even people who swear they're not religious have been echoing that theory. This is probably what it felt like to be in an airport after 9/11.

Just then, a waitress in her mid-thirties comes by, pen in hand, and asks us what we'd like to drink. Her hair is a dirty blonde, curly mess, and on her arm she has a few random tattoos. A compass, feathers, and thin lined flowers. Her face is wrinkled and is the clearest indicator of her age, though it looks a bit too old to be hers; maybe she killed somebody and stole their face, maybe she's lived a stressful life and smokes, who's to say really? I ask for some chocolate milk, and Alan asks for a Mr. Rox. As she begins writing I notice Alan staring hard at her tits, practically slobbering like a fucking dog with no self control.

"Oh we don't have Mr. Rox, is Roarie Cola okay?"

"Oh uh, I guess so, yeah." Alan says, taken aback, trying to look stone faced.

She moves along to the only other table in the restaurant and I inch forward, my chest on the table, and begin whispering to Alan. There is a small aquarium probably leftover from when this was an Asian buffet, amidst the generic silver ones is a bright tipped Red tail shark that floats stoically. "You see that fish there? With the orange tail?"

Already expecting something, he says, "Yeah, I do."

"That fish has more style than you'll ever have. I bet he wouldn't have gotten Roarie Cola like a little bitch. I bet he gets more pussy than you too. You just gonna let that slide?"

"What should I do? God—what should I do?" He exclaims in dramatic fashion.

"Let's fuck him up. Turn him into chum."

With a crummy Italian accent, Alan says "Yeah, make him sleep with the goons tonight."

We giggle at this stupid bit and unfortunately the waitress, who definitely heard our dumbasses comes back with both of our drinks, hands us our straws, and asks if we're ready. I look at Alan who gives an enthusiastic smile and I begin our order, already knowing what he would ask for.

"Yes, I'll have the New Mexican Omelette, with an extra slice of white bread, and for my friend here, he'll take the Supreme Philly. Please."

"I'll have that coming right up, either of you boys want any sauce?"

"Just hot sauce please." Alan replies, for me.

"Gotcha."

He nods, signifying he didn't want anything else, or at least not throwing a fuss about it, regardless, we continue talking about rappers, cool fishes, seizing on command and impermeable livers and the waitress' "killer rack," much to my discomfort. We're one of three groups in this place. If I had to describe the uncomfortable aura around it all, I'd have to reemphasize how it's akin to national tragedy. Just talking about it feels so useless, but what could I do? What could anyone do until we get even a clue about what happened? Everyone's best guess is just that it's either a divine act, or proof that aliens are real, I don't even know what else one could make of this. The worst theory I heard was that we all died and this is just purgatory we're in. I heard that one before, back when 2012 came and went and this one goth girl proposed that. I wonder what she's up to now, or if she remembers me calling her a "fucking retard" all those years ago. Just thinking about it more and more lets creep an unsettling feeling. I'm half expecting the heavens to open up and demons to pour forth and fuck some shit up, it sounds cool as hell I won't lie, and if their dicks are anything like the sex stores have them as, they should be at least a little hot, but I'm embarrassed thinking about all of this as I'm supposed to be an atheist and still think

that thinking bad thoughts will get me in trouble with a certain someone. Real shit though, I think I might have seen what happened:

I was up late watching a livestream as a legal adult with internet access. I'll admit it, it was a very sexy camboy that I was devoting my night to, and I missed the potential catalyst for the end of days because I fell asleep tugging my shit an hour in. As I woke up in horror—terrified that there would be someone I respect looking at my naked ass, I looked at my computer screen with my soft dick in hand and saw this cute little man in cat ears have golden rays of light shooting from his eyes and mouth. His entire being crumbling into a pile of shimmering powder, some have said that is a kind of salt but hell if I know. His neon striped bikini remained there as the chat freaked out. I wasn't even fully awake and as a result went back to sleep, thinking nothing of it, admittedly, not even caring that much. Hoping that maybe in the morning, that whatever is happening will stop and leave me alone.

That was Saturday.

The world didn't descend into chaos overnight as some would expect, the Agents of Oblivion failed to descend upon the sane; it was a biblical event according to some, but an unimportant one if that.

The morning news shows—even the crazy ones that froth at the mouth with insanity, spouting fentanyl for the nation, didn't seem to pay any mind. It was, for lack of a better description, an awkward apocalypse. I suppose the news wouldn't report on a plane that doesn't crash, so I guess there's none for a world that doesn't end.

But I don't know if that was real or not. That whole experience with the cow has made me realize I have insane people dreams so maybe that was all made up. Maybe, all these people have gone missing just because they felt like it. Reality can be a real drag sometime.

Our food comes out sizzling hot, and I can smell almost every ingredient in my meal. The peppers, onions, sliced chicken, everything but the shredded cheese within the fluffy omelette. It's all rolled together so well that none leaks out until I slice into it

with my fork, cutting it in thirds with almost no effort, and after my small slice they just pour out. If I had to give it a grade, it would deserve a solid A, no extra credit needed. Actually wait, no, A- since I forgot to ask for crushed red pepper flakes and it's definitely not my fault.

Alan's plate is almost as good as mine, the butter on the bread glistens well in this light and the beef slices hang just off of them, so as to support the turkey and onions. I don't even get to marvel at his Philly before he begins taking out the mushrooms on placing them besides the crispy crinkle fries, he says he does that since he doesn't like mushrooms. Why not just order without mushrooms?

"Cause they don't take that off the price, might as well make them make the whole thing if I'm gonna pay the whole price." He says, reading my mind. It's a point I've come to agree with more the older I get, but still, seems kinda pointless. I ask him for them and he nods with his mouth already full of fries. I'm waiting on the hot sauce before I dig in, though I see that his golden chain now glistens around his neck, the cross just out of sight, buried under his faded graphic hoodie and I think that in his second handful of fries he realizes this too by the way he pauses and looks up at me, as though I care to say it with him.

"So hey," he stutters, "Wanted to talk to you about something." He puts his fries down and sits up.

"Is it related to you converting back to being catholic?"

"Yeah."

"Any reason why? I mean, it seems a bit weird at this point, recent events considered and all."

"Some shit is more about ends, David. I've been focused on that too much lately." He takes a deep breath, "I gotta realize some things matter more than transient conditions or material pleasures, staying me, y'know? What's the point in doing this shit if I can't stay me? I think that's what you said when I asked why we shouldn't just get jobs."

It was.

He continues.

"Listen, I'm not asking you to be Catholic, but I was thinking you could consider going to church with me this Sunday. Go to confession, let's start new man, yeah?"

He gives me this puppy dog look that he knows I have trouble saying no to. I grimace, cross my arms and say no.

"You'll love it man—c'mon."

I sigh. I have my own personal beef against church and shit. Stuff with my dad I don't wanna talk about right now. I look down, then back up at him.

"I'll think about it," I mutter, "So now what?"

"Let's eat man."

"I'm still waiting on my hot sauce."

With pursed lips, he slowly stabs into his fries with his fork, but doesn't touch his philly again until I get my sauce.

We eat mostly in silence, make the occasional remark here and there, but in all honesty, I'm starving. I'm very much enthralled in every facet of this omelette, the egg is just perfectly above average, tender yet not chewy, it's soft as my teeth slide through it, and on top of that the fillings push me to the brink of genuinely saying, "Mmmmm." As though I were in a commercial advertising this place, with a beautiful and picturesque family and all. I might just come here with Samuel (I don't know what Sam is short for now that I think of it) to get another. I'm guessing Alan thinks the same with his philly since he devours it with massive bites, occasionally moaning, though he's like that with a lot of food so it's impossible to tell if he was just hungry or if it's that good. Overall, it takes us about 10 minutes to eat our respective meals. The checks come and we pay for one another, I try not to tip too much since I don't want the waitress to think I'm fine with having my drink refilled only twice, but after paying we spend about $10 more than we tipped at the claw machine up front in a vain attempt at freeing a little Beanbag baby.

"Fuck yeah!" Said neither of us, since we managed to get absolutely nothing. One day though, their cold beady eyes stare at me from inside their prison, "One day," they echo back. Making sure I promise them their freedom. As we walk out, I look at Alan and do my usual bit after we eat.

"Roarie Cola? Two glasses? With fries?"

He scowls, “Fuck off.”

“Yummers!” I poke his stomach and dig my finger a half inch into his fat belly and laugh.

We climb into his car and as I turn it on, he types in his playlist, and once we’re jamming to whatever the fuck this even is, we’re off on the road to the megamart.

We park somewhat close to the doors on the right side of the building, and grab one of those buggies that have a child seat. I look at him excitedly, and he nods, smiling. I fit in with ease and strap in, and we’re off to the races.

I tell him what I need, maybe some condoms too just in case things go great. We also get some snacks and various items for him.

“Oh! Let’s stop by the freezer section.”

Puzzled, I ask him why.

“I was thinking I should only eat fish now. That’s a thing Christians do I think.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is. Remember that shit about those monks putting a pig in the pond? That’s because they can only eat water animals like fish and hippos and gators and shit.”

“Those were monks, Alan. You’re not a fucking monk. You don’t know how to cook, nor do you even like fish.”

“I like fish sticks.”

“You’re just gonna eat fish sticks for protein now? Also I don’t think rules for monks go for all Catholics.”

“Well they’re like model Catholics aren’t they? And if I must—yes.”

“Then you also would be fine with no sex or jacking off?”

He attempts to visualize a world where his lust is contained, but even in the brief nanoseconds that he struggles to conceptualize such a thing, I can sense him lying.

It was not even a week ago that he told me in person, while high as a kite eating two spicy deluxe fried chicken sandwiches, that he wouldn’t stop eating these even if God parted the heavens and commanded him to. I give this like three days.

He pushes the cart and I around the store, while we keep talking about menial shit, where he makes an offhand remark about business in public. Something about some guy named 'Headshot Horseman' which immediately lets me know this is a kid since only kids pick names like that, I've heard Bruiser, Scorpion, Loco, Spider; it's a bit embarrassing to think of all these people that asked me to call them these *badass* names with a straight face. Most anyone over the age of 15 gets a more vague and less threatening nickname, mainly for whenever you get picked up by police and so they don't interrogate you for it, but also by that time, if you're known long enough you've likely done some dumb or embarrassing shit everyone constantly reminds you of with a stupid nickname. Despite how small-scale I am, even I have one. The reason I'm occasionally called 'Stuntman' is because it used to be a running joke about me that the reason I used to be so short and skinny was that my puberty had stunted, clearly I was just a late bloomer. I snap back to reality, still thinking about my pituitary gland and squeezing it dry of hormones and chemicals like a tube of minced meat and realize Alan is publicly talking about a drug deal he's setting up to my 5'8, average height for an American man by the way, ass.

"And like this British guy has K or some shit, and this dude can get it, hold it for us, we can buy low and sell it high over here. Like we can corner the market on this shit."

We aren't even moving, just stationed in the cookie aisle as he goes on about how this'll be the perfect way to end our little play. Completely oblivious to the rest of the world, like he's got dollar signs in his eyes and ears or something.

"So what do you think?"

"Fuck it, I'll be on standby. Where's Horse at?"

"Jonesboro."

"Oh shit."

That's like three and a half hours away, with speeding. Though I suppose I'm not ever doing anything, plus we can prep for that, make it a little road trip for the two of us. We discuss little things we can bring to make the trip better, and brave little Alan even offers to drive for a bit when it happens since it'll be a straight, boring, one lane shot for the majority of it all and he

feels like he can manage that. He tells me that it probably won't be soon, but we should still be prepared at a moments notice since this kid is kinda "fucking insane" and doesn't like to wait on people. He tells me about how he knew this kid from his time in the psych ward a few years ago, and I'm guessing that means that this guy was the upper since I have a vague understanding of how roommates go. Alan seems really cautious about this guy, a rare trait for someone who in the age of stone definitely would have died from eating something that would be called "DIMWIT'S DELIGHT" and be known for causing the most painful death imaginable.

We roll around for a bit longer before we head to checkout and get rung up by an old man with a deathly scowl on his face. The frown pulling the rest of the skin on his face down as his eyes are a mix of anger and a storm of repressed reds and pinks and yellows. I always assume shit about people by the way they look, and as he scans our items I imagine a story about how his kids got to go and left him here alone, or how his spouse of 40 years was taken in their sleep, leaving him alone in the morning with nothing. The reverse halo effect in action. Like I said though, these are just assumptions, for all I know this is just how, I squint at his nametag, Rolando normally looks. The total comes out to $58.38 and Alan pays with 3 twenties, one of which he got from me.

We head out into the parking lot, the pre-afternoon air still hanging around, with a crisp moisture just out of reach that proves for certain that it'll rain soon. On the way to the car, I bump into one this guy I used to know, Eli, outside the garden section; he looks completely different since the last time I saw him, a couple weeks before I went clean, about a year ago. His head is freshly buzzed, he's wearing a filth covered olive green jacket, and he's missing all of his signature rings, even his favorite sigil one. We try to avoid talking to him and I see, through the corner of my eye, he's carrying a sign that on one side says:
"INHABITANTS OF EARTH,
MISERY AND WOE,
AT BLASTS OF OTHER TRUMPETS,
THE THREE ANGELS WILL BLOW!

THE FIRST THREE BEEN BLOWN,
AND SET CALIFORNIA ABLAZE,
FIVE MORE REMAIN,
IT'S THE END OF DAYS!"

It's kinda cool that it rhymes, I can't lie. Something that sticks out to me more is the fact that this motherfucker has an earbud in and he catches me mean mugging him.
I break the silence first, "So you believe in god now?"
Within a flash, his neutral look morphs into an Easter island esque stare as he goes off what is probably a well rehearsed script, "That is not the question my brotha. The real question is, does God believe in us?"

"The fuck does that mean?"

"Tell me, my brotha," I genuinely think he's too white to say it like that, but I don't mention it. "Do you know what the Holy Spirit is?"

"That's the dove right? Ain't all of them supposed to be holy?"

"They are all divine spirits within the trinity, but the Holy Spirit is what will save us all, revealed by God the son, yet it too is God. Tell me, do you think you are beyond redemption?"
Probably. But that isn't entirely relevant, and his stare pierces like a blade into my soul.

"No."

"Good. None of us are. We are all worth saving. That is what that means. God knows we exist, and he believes in us—he knows our asses are capable of being saved and he knows what your ass needs saving from." He pulls a pamphlet out from one of many pockets and shoves it to me. "Now run off, confess, and repent dear boy. We all must."

He looks off, I don't think he recognizes me. I think I've riled him up, perhaps I've doomed the fine people of Megamart to hearing his awkward chanting. On the other side of his sign that I can now see it says "AMERICA=FAG NATION" which if it's meant to be a hateful thing, I gotta admit, it accidentally goes hard. I would put that in my lawn for pride.

Strangely enough, this interaction reminds me that I have an uncle that goes by Scorpion among his friends, though the

reason why is because he and my tia have a bunch of STD's, hence a painful sting. I guess a badass name isn't just for kids, though my point still stands.

On our way home, we stop at the car wash by our old high school. Not to wash the car, but to litter out all the trash in it as an ancient fertility ritual/passive aggressive tongue bite to this kid who works there. After cleaning the car out I ask if he wants to do anything else.

"Nah not really, we can drop off your groceries first though, so you don't gotta walk with all that shit on you."

Sweet relief. The idea of trudging home with bags in each hand from Alan's would be enough to soil this day. During the drive, I don't talk; while listening to music I was just reminded of something I'd rather not talk about with him. Thinking about lives cut short, potential that was wasted and that'll never see the light of day. The weight in my stomach that hangs and pulls me down. I don't know what's hit me actually, it was a stray thought that I didn't snip, and as a result it's taken root, now I'm trapped in my own hedge maze of guilt. Some days are harder than others, and some just feel like a strangling heat combined with pervasive moisture that doesn't let go, even in the comfort of home.

We come to my house and unpack all the groceries, and then I'm reminded that I've still yet to do laundry, so before I forget I have Alan put everything up while I load the washer, even putting in these sniffy beads that are colored in that nice radioactive shade of pink that scream mass production, made in the blind spot of god. It's been a while since the last time I did this so I have it on max load, set it, and will most definitely forget it. As I come back to the kitchen I see Alan is already helping himself to one of my mom's fiber bars which he snacks on as I take him home.

Before long I'm back at my place and it's not even 2PM. What's a youth like me expected to do aside from try to enjoy having the house to myself for another day? I fill up Anthony's bowl, throw in some sliced turkey pieces, and make her a bed next to the couch. Afterwards I roll up a couple joints, pour some mango nectar, yoink a big bag of chips from the pantry, and sit my ass down to watch whoever's uploaded anything on the living

room TV. Embarrassingly, and I say this in confidence and don't wish to hear about this outside, I'm just watching old YouTube videos that I used to watch as a kid, this time just high.

I wrap myself in a thick white blanket which already has red crumbs from the weekend, and as I blow smoke out the window I realize how beautifully quiet and foggy it is outside. The city and highways seem as quiet as they actually are, a thick air of silence and a soft mourning fill the world as I burn another. I've seen various theories as for what's going on, my favorite outlandish one is along the lines that we actually all died, and what I'm in right now is purgatory. I always imagined earth as purgatory, a waiting room for eternity should such a thing even exist. The thought alone that I'm dead, just unknowingly waiting for a grand revelation I'm destined to come upon is strangely comforting. Beats thinking that after a lifetime of potential struggle, war, and sickness, I have to suffer through even more shit before I finally get an answer as to where I'll go.

I tell people I'm an atheist, or sometimes agnostic if I'm feeling fancy, but the truth is I just don't like identifying with my old Catholic roots. The idea of heaven and hell, more relevantly, of a god that watches, those always exist in the back of my mind. That for once, someone will know I'm not a good person, where I can't just lie for every moment I'm alive and have to be forced upon with someone's genuine opinion of me. I worry most about what an objective look at me would look like. Where I cannot adjust my face to be hit by light in such a way to obscure the razor bumps and pimples and fat and lack of definition.

As I sit on my couch all tired, warm in my own embrace, I have the feeling I'm being watched, but instead of paranoia, it's more that way you feel when you're at the park and kick a ball so far, check to see if your dad was watching and see a massive, proud, smile, except for me that memory belongs to my mom. Fuck man, I miss her beyond belief. I entertain the idea of sharing a joint with her again as she cooks this pasta we both love that's essentially penne lasagna pasta for lack of a better name, and I fall asleep both beyond comfortable, and worried I'll never see her again.

I wake up at around 7pm, in a slight daze with the tv still on, auto playing some video essay about a reality show I've never heard about. I check on Anthony and sure enough, she's still snoring, drooling and heaving loud breaths like an old woman, with a smoker's rasp to match. I lazily make her some dinner, and afterwards take her to go piss and shit outside, the cold fog hangs even now as the sun has long since set, and night inches ever so slowly, draped in a periwinkle veil that makes the full moon over yonder horizon a soft glow for the werewolves and I to enjoy should we wish. I bring her bed out by my room as I move everything in there, chips, blanket, joints, not the juice though, that goes back in the fridge for obvious reasons.

Sitting alone in my room, I occupy my time by watching various shows and texting my crush, hoping that I'm not giving too much away, I'm gonna be honest, I don't even know if he's gay. He might be though, or rather I really hope so, especially with how adorable he looks in these wooly sweaters he's posted himself wearing on his story. We flirt for about an hour and a half before he tells me he has to go to sleep, just enough so that I'm horny as all hell and absolutely can't sleep in this horrible state where my fingers feel electric and keep slowly dancing their way down to where I both do and do not want them.

I check to make sure all the doors to the house are locked, windows as well, and even set the alarm, it's not like I'd be ashamed, or that my mom doesn't know, I would just prefer to not be literally caught with my pants down should my mom come home.

Admittedly, it's strange thinking that she knows I'm gay. It still feels like that shouldn't be the case, but just the faintest hint of the night she found out instantly kills my mood. It's a strange feeling, these moments of lucidity I find with my dick in my hand, as though tugging on it gives me the blessing of clairvoyance and doesn't slowly rot my frontal lobe or whatever. While on my phone I see that massive hail storms have started along the east coast, Neo-Agartha/Florida especially is being put to the wall for its crimes against humanity. The California fires got put out sometime today thankfully, with various websites crediting it to either the newly reworked private firefighting companies, or to

the recent national park guidelines. I don't think I'm smart enough, or care enough to really comment my opinion.

Now I'm in the living room again cuddling Anthony, her kisses comforting me as I hold myself in my blanket, hoping my mom will walk in through the door at any given moment, laugh at "that strange smell" and tell me to get my ass to bed.

That moment never comes though, and I awaken after an unexpected nap to a silent house. It takes me a minute to realize, it's already 8AM,—

WEDNESDAY

What will I even do today? The cursed blessing of freewill and unemployment is that I am doomed to be free, and this is exactly that. I don't have anything planned, Alan is hanging out with our friend Jesse today if I recall, so that leaves me with nothing to do, unless I want to tag along as a platonic third wheel which while I know I'd be welcome, it would be kinda weird. That friend in particular always reminds me that for all ills in my life I am the one to decide if they infect me; for better or for worse I feel stupid around him, and my ego can't handle that right now as I gear myself up for the heroic charge later on this week. I must not only think of myself as, I must become, Mr. BigDick. I decide nothing is on the agenda today, save maybe for some chores and playing with Anthony. A puddle of drool collects around her as she snores against the base of the TV stand, fully awake. I'm right there with her in spirit it seems.

The best part, and arguably one of the most important to any day, is breakfast. Despite my love of the more complex, today I'm just gonna make some egg on toast. I never did get the exact recipe though, and I don't really know how to get the egg to stick, so it's just a pan toasted slice of toast with an over easy egg on top of it. Drizzling hot sauce and crushing black pepper over, the aroma of burnt peppercorns fills the air as the translucent turns opaque. Halfway through I put on some smooth tracks from my favorite rappers, interspersed with the occasional ad, the dimly lit mood is calm. Alongside the toast, I sear a serano to eat alongside it, it sings along to the sound of a low droning bass that rumbles both outside and inside, on beat with the quaking of the earth.

I sit with my breakfast, using a fork to drench the bread in yolk, sliced open and bleeding out on top. One bite out of the serano, then a spoonful of eggy toast, it's almost melodic until I run out of chaser, and I'm left with a big third of a pepper, and as I grind it between my molars, I feel the AC's current and for a brief second try to think about the company that produced it and how their stock looks right now. Seeds and skins explode like

artillery shells within my mouth, and the seconds that it takes to chew and swallow leave a lingering and scorching taste on my tongue. Willpower, the volition within my heart, it will carry me through the valley of flame, as the fires of my heart that climb into the dark sky and demand Existence know my name have saved me from worse, even if these flames have been muted for quite some time. The spice of the serano takes me back to the year prior, my pants soaked in piss and mind in a daze, my overdose. Darkness and the sulfuric air on the tip of my tongue, faced with eternity, all I could think about was my mom being sad to hear about me, and I think that is what drug me out of that drug.

I go inside and for no reason at all, check my pocket and find that pamphlet from yesterday. There's nothing new that I didn't gather from my conversation with Eli, turns out that it very much was scripted—our whole conversation basically. I'm surprised I wasn't in on it. On the back however, there's a faded block of text that says "IN THE BEGINNING, CAIN KILLED HIS BROTHER ABEL WITH A ROCK." Under a silhouetted rendition of Cain and Abel. Underneath it says "BUT TODAY, CAIN IS STILL KILLING HIS BROTHER ABEL WITH A ROCK." With a picture of a kind of racist caricature of a black man smoking out of a pipe, bug eyed and having a frazzled fro. "THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO GET SOBER, BUT ONLY ONE PATH TO HEAVEN. THURSDAYS AT 9:00 PM" This page alone forces me to think about my sobriety journey as much as I don't want to.

It's been exactly 395 days since I got sober. The colors of the world have become brighter day by day, even if slightly, though it still feels a bit dulled. Where once I sought to make them dull to make it easier to look at, I crave the feeling of them burning their ways into my retinas. Two sides of me begin arguing, I haven't even swallowed yet, but they go back and forth between the ideas and notions of intoxication. One craves the feeling of sweet oblivion, likely the same one that wants diseased sex, a nazi world order, and total heat death of the universe, with myself suffering the worst pain as a punishment for being me. The other craves pain as well but because I will walk out of the jaws of the beast pure, because the world sharpens me without

regard for my comfort, this one wants family, it wants to gorge us with the salt of the sweat from toil, it wants to be immortal and it wants to be crunched so fiercely that the pressure of my bones caving in will be enough to begin a new universe. They claw for each other's throats and batter one another with fists until I sip my water and find common ground for them, as they both agree that right now, I want my lazy morning special. The temperature in my house reaches 68 again and the heat switches off.

I pause to look out the blinds first, before setting about my ritual. The sky is a watercolor whirl of steel toned blues and greys and as great cumulus motherships blot out the sun, I can see little rays of light pointing down on earth from mother sun to say "Hello, I'm still here, how are you?" I'm good today. I think I'll be alright. I can tell her that and be completely honest through and through I think. I'm thankful I won't be going out now; little pockets of rain fall from the sky and pepper the soft dirt with kisses. I can see in the distance, a Great Wall of a storm looming over the land, it won't come here, and it won't bother me, but the might of such a massive entity is not lost on me. The earth is in quiet mourning for those that have left her in pursuit of whatever is above. A weird part about being so god fearing is that I do indeed worry that damnation is upon us all, and that we're most definitely fucked, but the little pitter patter of rain picks up. Drumming away on my rooftop, and collecting on my window, it tells me it's okay, it won't be the end.

The city's outline drowns in the wall of rain, and the land is a silent, flat desert filled with plants and animals, it's just humans that have left. Maybe it's the earth going back to how it once was, maybe this isn't even a strange thing to the planet—it's the old normal become new. It's only been a few seconds of me looking out, but I feel as though I've been studying the area for hours trying to find something that's not there amidst million pound of water droplet armadas and the legions of yellowing grass, holding out against the cold in testudo formations despite the ever approaching horde. Okay. Now I'm going.

First, I set the water for the coffee kettle on, then I cut a lime for step two, a cold beer from the fridge. Regal, "La cerveza excelente," 3.6 ABV, and a golden piss like consistency that

glimmers in the fridge light. The lime slips in and as it falls, a layer of foam erupts to begin its inauguration. The water has yet to start steaming, and tells me I have enough time for the next step. I stop by my bedroom, grab one of my joints, light some incense, and then sit in my bathtub to smoke and drink. Pharcyde keeps me company, spewing absolute fire as the french rolling paper slowly burns away, crumbling into the same ash that I will one day return to.

I make it a conscious effort to not use a grinder for the weed that I smoke. For business, it's exactly that, but for myself, each bud that comes to me has its own history. It had to be smuggled to get here, either from Colorado or from the Mexican cartels. I try to imagine the story of mine in my papers, crumbled by hand, and undiluted. I wonder if the Islamic people of centuries long since past could even fathom the idea of me as they placed their first laws around it.

I try to imagine the story of my green from sprout to smoke. Little green stalks piercing through solid earth like the dead come back to life, filling their lungs up with air that means nothing for them. The tendrils eventually grow and twist and turn and thicken and before long, a mighty stalk stands in place of a tiny seed. Through rain and hail it stands, knowing deep in its heart that something planned for it and by extension, its suffering means something. I guess I'm trying to imprint too much of a positive outlook on this in order to try to relate it to myself. It was grown, harvested, shipped off and consumed. Maybe that's the more relatable aspect than all my shit about perseverance and meaning. It's a nice smoke, I'll admit that much.

The air is less clear here from both sources of smoke, but just as I reach the filter, I hear the click of the kettle to tell me it's ready for coffee. It sounds like a crazy combo I know, beer then coffee, but I've been doing this for a year now. A drink to take the edge off and one to put it back on.

I spend my beginning buzz doing some chores since the house is starting to get gross, and to make my mom less mad when she comes home to it smelling like weed and all of her beers missing. I stick in my earbuds and get to work for today. First, I load the dishwasher, scrubbing away any food scum as I

need to. Next, cleaning my room, pipe, ashtray, and doing my bed properly, down to the little fold in my blanket right in front of the pillows. Vacuum the halls, sweep the kitchens, very exciting stuff, I swear. Then I remember—the laundry.

I pray that I didn't leave them wet in the washer too long, but it's already late. The mildew smell has already begun, stinking up my favorite shirts to the point that they smelled better before I put them in here. Fuck me; my mom is gonna be so pissed off. I take them all out, make and leave a mix of baking soda in the detergent container, and pour some vinegar in the drum. I hear this is the strategy to clean the machine itself, which after all, is what I'll need to do so my mom doesn't consider castrating me as punishment. Fuck man. The soggy pile of clothes stands as a testament to my failures. A reminder of the fool I am that rings as loud as the pounding of the machine.

I return in an hour and load it back up with some extra detergent. Trying to not kick myself too hard for that. Classic blunder on my end, but still. Within that time, I've spent it stretching my legs on the couch and working hard at leaving my ass imprint within it. It's not even that late into the afternoon, only five. In the same way that my ancestors did, I bring out a deck of cards and start fucking around. I play a few games of solitaire, and then kings corner, but all in all, this only lasts about forty minutes before I get bored. I check my phone and social media throughout and find it more psychologically damaging than alleviating. Right wing psyops about how I'm a pathetic man until I give money to the never ending army of sex pests, advertisements for the new infinite Reich (now with soft pornography to really get me going) and political takes scientifically engineered to piss me off and waste more time on these stupid fucking apps. Every minute is spent in regret, yet I can't help but check. I occasionally do justify it seeing my friends and their escapades, but most of my efforts do indeed go towards scrolling mindlessly and wishing life to be no more. Why do I do anything, I wonder?

I take a break to step outside, cigarette in hand and my water bottle in the other. It's a little past noon now, bordering on evening, the streetlights go on infinitely both ways, and I find

myself in the dark on a wet metal chair—rocking back and forth. I turn on a little table lamp to illuminate my surroundings, as cool as I feel smoking in the dark, I'm still scared of rapists and murderers. Just down the street however, I see a shuffling shadow, a massive one that snaps or pops as it gets closer. Is this even real? As it gets closer I notice that it's actually a small mob of people, their faces are unrecognizable at this distance but I think I count at least a dozen or more. They are absolutely the source of this snapping, and as they step closer into view I see what's causing it—they're whipping themselves. Some with belts, some with actual whips, and others just have crudely assembled cat o'nine tails or whatever they're called—the kinky thing. I notice one with an implement made of wire and it picks up its pace to walk up to me.

It wears a pointed hood reminiscent of the KKK, though this one is all black, as well as their curtain of a dress, though through their hood I can see two deep brown eyes that remind me of the smell of the most comforting loaves of bread that smell of home. She speaks in a soft, somewhat quiet voice, "I'm sorry for the disturbance."

"You're okay. Are you real?"

"Depending on what you think of dreams, yes." A slight drizzle falls from the sky, it's not enough to become full rain drops so as a result—little water droplets hang in the air, shining in the warm glow of the light around her. She has the presence of a warm memory that tastes like chocolate and coffee. In her pale hands she tightly holds her tool, and lets it hang by her side.

"What does that mean?"

"Do you believe in god?"

Smugly, I respond with, "Is that the question you should be asking?"

She pauses for a moment, her beautiful brown eyes narrow and look through me. "Are you worthy of being saved?"

"I don't think so."

"Why?" Her voice sounds like Brazilian jazz, and it would be honey if it had a taste. I could listen to her speak for hours.

"Why should I be saved?"

Like the smoothest of music, a saxophone playing mournfully into the night as a soft drum beat fills in behind it with a bass guitar strumming out the groundwork, "Because we are all sinners. Judas betrayed his best friend for thirty silver pieces, and we betray him again everyday for far less. Addiction, weakness, passivity, nihilism, and entitlement. I can see into you and I know you're not beyond saving."

"What's your sin?" I've never been attracted to women, and I'm still not—but the one who stands before me almost radiates in holy light, I find it hard to believe that she could have committed any crime aside from being too divine to exist upon such a flawed material realm.

"There doesn't need to be a grave sin in order to be in need of saving. We all need to be redeemed. I can't say I've killed anybody, but I will bleed and I will cry and beg and scream that I need forgiveness" Beneath her mask I can see her eyes gushing with water, and her voice cracks as she recounts the memories she doesn't want to say—tracing over them like branding scars. "What's done in the dark will be brought to the light. You can and will be saved." Little ponds of water rest motionless around her, even as she walks closer and steps her bare feet into them, they don't splash. It's almost as though a ghost passes by.

"I can't."

She finally steps onto the first stair of my porch, but takes not one step closer. "You don't want to. It's okay. It's scary. It's easier to fall than it is to climb, but you can do it. If not today, then soon. If not to human ears, then when the lord sings out." She hits a high note as she says my name in a way equivalent to the songs of sirens, kisses of ocean mist spraying on my knees and the deep diamond blues of the infinite abyss sung in unity with a twangy guitar, "David."

Before I can even think of what to say or ask how she knows my name, she walks back and begins whipping her back in sync with her group. I watch them march away, and sit back down trying to wrap my head around this and everything else. I don't know what to say, as though there was anything I could. On the ground I see one bloody footprint stained into the concrete, but nothing else to prove the visit from the angel I received.

"Goodbye Seagirl." The rain stopped sometime during our conversation. As she left, she took the rain with her and left behind the stars. I look up to them, and feel some strange sinking feeling, that something is looking back down at me—or maybe up.

Hours pass, I've smoked a joint, and done my best to forget about that—trying to not dwell on that too hard. I'm on my bed now, nothing else to do today other than just see it through. I wonder, will I get days like this when I'm older with an actual job? I sure hope so, I think too much about where the wind blows, but not enough about where it blows to. Shit, maybe I'll be the god damn president of the United States of fucking America. The world is my oyster. I know every young man my age thinks he'll be a famous rapper. That he has stories worth telling, and more egotistically, worth hearing. I'm not saying that I'm like that, but if I went down any route I would hope to end up the best. I would like to think I am a special person, with an immense, oceanic soul—but then I think about how it was only a year ago I was suffering from withdrawals and sweating so much that I woke up in my piss more than a few times. Perhaps I could be the first junkie president, state mandated dope pushing, regulated lacing, free needles and fentanyl for everyone. Though perhaps I should admit to myself that I'm not really good at anything, and I should figure that out before throwing my hat into the presidential race. Maybe it would be good to also think I'm more than just an addict, stained by its curse; all that effort to get sober and yet I still struggle to distance myself away from that idea.

I don't mean to pivot immediately to something so serious, but lately I've been thinking of killing myself. I'm not depressed I think, and I haven't gotten molested or whatever. It's just that some days it feels like my life and many others' are just so damn pointless. I think that if it's such a struggle to justify them with meaning, perhaps there isn't any. Like what am I living for, in all honesty? I have yet to put a razor to my wrist or tie a noose around my throat but some days I just think that I don't have much reason to stick around. That life is such a worthless investment it's better to pull out now during what are suppoed to be the best years of my life. I look at Anthony and immediately am filled with guilt, thinking that maybe I should at least stick

around for her. It's a bit embarrassing to think that the only thing keeping me alive is my dog but I suppose it works. If the only thing that stops me from killing myself is that I have to take care of my dog, I guess it's not so bad. Some people are convinced they'll find love and that keeps them going, some do it for god and country, I suppose it's all the same end we chase.

That is the ideal situation though, isn't it? That our lives do not have a clear cut goal in mind and that to exist is enough, I would hope so, but for some reason—today especially, I have trouble convincing myself that. It's a never ending battle it seems between my two dogs inside of me, barking and clawing at each other but never coming to a conclusion, leaving me destitute and confused between chasing self destruction and hedonism or some higher calling based on absurd principles like morals and expectations. I got them dogs in me indeed, I like to imagine my inner monologue as a bunch of little me's truth be told. I like to imagine them going on little adventures in my brain like that one movie about the sentient emotions, though for my little me's they have to navigate the shady underbelly of my brain's political landscape. Dead hookers and drug scandals as a way to distract myself from the gaping hole within me that howls with desire to be filled. Not in the sex way—I should clarify.

Throughout the day I've been texting the target of my desire. A few steps above small talk, a couple jokes, and tactical flirts, and before I know it we confirm for tomorrow to grab a bite at LouieLui. Like the way the rabbit falls into the snare set right outside of his tunnel, so too does he remark with "I had no idea you liked me like that lol," and he confirms that yes, he is indeed attracted to men. I can't wait.

I stand in the living room texting him, and I feel the biting chill of the breeze from outside as Anthony runs out to piss, and I think about the "where I'm from," part of my life. It's a Tuesday night, looking at the walls and the embarrassing and obviously fake gold rings I'm wearing tells me I'm 16 again. My parents are screaming at each other, blood drips from my mouth, a cocktail of fear and rejection fill me, and the blow from my dad only minutes prior leaves me stumbling like I'm drunk. He knows the truth about his son—a guy from Alan's old friend group thought it would

be funny to out me to my dad because I made a joke about him being so dumb his family should collect welfare from it. Even in this moment, I still think it was pretty funny and somewhat worth it even if the threat of being murdered by my father is so palpable in the air it makes it hard to breathe. The taste of blood lingers in my mouth over notes of citrus and Asian sex bot pussy fluid, I used to drink energy drinks. This day—I remember, they didn't have the usual one I got in stock so I settled for the zero sugar variant for the first and only time. It's forever been tainted by this night.

I stumble out of my room and see my mom standing over him, the fires of Hell burn within her eyes as she grits her teeth, almost ready to tear into him. Despite his mountainous stature, he looks so small on the floor, this is the first time in my life that I realize my parents will someday die. Worse yet, I realize they can be wrong, and in the back of my mind, through the jungle of terror and worry that he will kill me, I'm thinking that's worse.

He scuttles away and out of the house, my mother is shaking and breathes deeply. While exhaling, she deflates and suddenly I'm in her arms as she peppers my face with kisses, apologizing over and over again.

"Why are you sorry?" I mumble out.

"For calling you that awful word, I'm sorry."

It is only now hitting me that she told him, "I don't care if he's a fucking faggot. Don't you ever lay your hands on him–so help me god." Before they got physical.

"It's okay," I bury my face in her chest, tears are streaming down my face, "Do you still love me?"

She hesitates for the longest second that ever was, "Why would you ever ask that?"

I just want to be sure. Worse than my fear of death is the fear that both of my parents would see me as unlovable. For a moment the size of the earth shrinks to be only five feet and four inches tall, holding me against her breast, and if the ground opened up and tried to swallow me whole, she wouldn't let me fall. I am once again standing in my living room, phone in hand, Anthony runs back inside, it has been exactly two minutes. The heat kicked on.

The rest of the day lingers on as I try to patiently wait for my date. Planning my outfit goes easily enough since I usually dress like shit. I lintroll my slacks, scrub my shoes, and take a shower after dinner (reheated pizza from the weekend) where I make sure to scrub both my ass and balls with a fine towel towards the end of it with an exfoliating cedar and ocean scented bodywash. While scrubbing my hair clean with a combo of honey vanilla shampoo and conditioner, I start to think about what could happen should things go well. Just thinking about the possibility of running my fingers through his light brown, curly hair, with my tongue in his mouth surprisingly enough makes it harder to be patient. I decide to hold off, which is insane since I dry off only a few minutes after 7PM, with nothing better to do. Truly, nothing at all. Nothing that comes to mind. I spread cocoa butter lotion all over me as I stare in the mirror and try not to tear my dick off in a lust fueled rage when I accidentally rub lotion on it.

I go to bed early tonight, the frustration feeling like my legs are on fire. I have a taser in my pants, a .44 magnum ready to go off at any given moment down the throat of this cute boy like he was former Pennsylvanian state representative, R. Budd Dwyer. I look at the wall and try to do some military style shit to fall asleep and for the first time in days, instead of being chest-burstingly anxious I am flesh-rippingly horny. I remember the sex toy I bought and think about putting it on and cranking one out, how absolutely glorious it would be and how much better I'd feel afterwards, as though the trumpets of heaven would sound off as I finish. I almost give in, but instead of putting on my cock ring thing and going to town, I manage to fall asleep. The earth's crust cracks open before bursting forth with molten lava, and before I know what's happening—it goes from seeping out to erupting into the stratosphere, a dark sky covers the land and life is no more–birds fall from the sky as I shift and stir from this wet dream that soon wakes me up to a pitch black room with my legs sticky, sheets wet, and my head about to explode from how unfair my life is. I want to fuck so bad it's crazy. It's just sweat thankfully, but lord have mercy.

I change, load the sheets into the washer, remember to turn it on this time and go back to sleep. Afterwards I dream about something probably, I don't remember what it was but towards the end I lick my teeth, specifically the area of my left upper molars, and I feel them wiggle. All of them. I grit my teeth thinking they'll get stuck into place but sure enough, they all start to feel loose. I run into my bathroom and look into a mirror, my reflection deformed and warped; I grab onto a few teeth and give them a light pull. They come out in a welded set and I drop them in horror down the sink where they scatter as I look into my bleeding mouth, my gums dripping with crimson and throat paralyzed, unable to scream. I stand there looking at my reflection, my clenched teeth suddenly lighter, and feel my heart pound out of its chest as I can't decide whatever I'm to do about my lack of teeth, until I realize it was only a dream and struggle to fall back asleep. Eventually I manage to doze off and fall back into oblivion's stupor. For a couple of hours.

THURSDAY

12:10AM-The first message from Alan.

"Yo you up?"

12:17AM-The second message, I'm still asleep.

"Bro wake up" followed by three pleading eyes emojis.

12:20AM-The third message and first call.

"Daviiiiiiiiid"

12:21AM-He begins calling and spamming me, the constant vibrating starts to make me toss and turn.

"YO"

"WAKE"

"THE"

"FUCJ"

"UP"

12:25AM-I awaken.

"What the fuck man?" I call him and he turns on his camera. His face is lit from his phone's flash, his doublechin almost cloaked entirely in overexposed white light as he calmly tells me the last thing I want to hear right now.

"Aye whats up man. Yo I need you to drive."

I'm still half asleep, but I perk up as I hear him say this.

"What like," I dread even suggesting it, "Right now?"

"Yeah like asap."

"You're shitting me."

"Nah like deadass get ready, I'll fill you in when you get here."

"So I need to walk over to your place too? You aren't even outside?"

"Dude it's dark outside fuck no I ain't driving."

"But you want me to walk all the way to your place?"

"Just get over here, I'll tell you what's up when you get here."

"Oh my fuck-"

I hang up. There's no way this is happening. I can't fucking believe this. Oh my god. I try to fight this, just to lie back down and ignore this, get more sleep before my cute date. To pretend like I'm ignorant about what this all is. Before long I'm sliding my slacks on, hoodie, then jacket. I refill Anthony's bowl

since I know this will take that long, I really hope it won't, but as I prepare the text I'm going to send in my head, I slowly accept what's to come, swallowing this bitter truth down like molten lead or the leaves of a star that hates me in particular.

As I put on my shoes, Anthony rubs her head up against me, looking at me with such a deep sadness in her eyes.
"Don't leave me here, David. Don't leave me here in the dark now."

Her eyes tell me as they well up with tears, completely dry and empty as she just never likes it when I leave. I wish she too would tell me to say fuck the money. Literally anyone honestly. I speedwalk out of the house, through the highway, and past the stupid fucking checkpoint that thankfully doesn't have that fat prick manning it. I count my cigarettes on the way and check my phone, just Alan rushing me and notifications telling me he's posted on his story. I arrive on his front door at 01:08AM.

By the grace of God he's ready, shoes on and everything. I'm half surprised he was willing to cancel his nightly ritual of masturbating for hours. We load into the car and he finally tells me what's going on.
He looks at me, both drearily and excitedly before saying:
"Guess what I'm good for!"
"What, nothing?"
"You remember me telling you about Headshot, right?" He carries on, as though I didn't just say a really good joke.
"Horse?"
"Yeah him. He told me he found this bag of straight H and is willing to sell for a twenty."
"He found a bag? Like it just fell out of the sky?"
"Nah off the street. It's like this little baggie."
I look at him as he says this, the car still unmoved, purring away. His eyes glued onto me, twitching towards every small movement I made. The brief silence probably makes his heart stomp in his chest, and I'm tempted to let it ride out of spite, alas–
"So, we-" I catch myself, "I, am gonna drive for like four hours so we can buy a baggie of supposed Heroin that's twenty dollars, that your friend you met at an insane asylum just found on the street. Am I correct?"

Alan looks through the windshield, then back at me, lips pursed.
"Yes."
Fuck me.
"I know it sounds crazy, but dude, if this is true, and it works well, we could flip this shit for like a thousand dollars, maybe more."
The fact that this is his logic dampens my mind like a wet sponge. The only thing that's worse is the fact that I actually consider this. That I think about helping my mom out with groceries, bills, that I could pay for my date and I tomorrow-oh shit. I almost forgot about that.
"Fine." I let out, I breathe in, close my eyes, and prepare a cigarette in the cup holder. One thing at a time. The journey of a million miles begins with a single step.
"Give me a minute to think."
Four hours to, and four hours back. We could make it in time assuming we don't fuck around.
"Alright." I'm filled with more enthusiasm now. "You got his address?"
"Yeah man yeah. Here-" he takes out his phone and quickly opens up his socials, scrounging for his address.
As he stumbles, he assures that we'll go halfsies on the profit, with him fronting the operating cost, the entire twenty dollars! He even coaxes my enthusiasm out by pulling out a delicious cigarillo, wine woodtipped, my favorite.
"Got it!"

He hands me his phone and I type the address into my GPS, three hours, and fourty minutes, we could even save twenty minutes by going on the toll road which we won't do. I load up a Gang Starr album, let go of the parking brake, put the car in drive, and start our trek.

Darkness and silence cloak the city tonight, dogs bark and few cars crawl along the highway, more silently sit on the sides– missing their masters. Coasting along the streets, I can still hear families talking or screaming at each other. Usually on winter nights, families being locked up like this led to more gunshots, more cases, more statistics and talking points for lawmakers. Now it's just the screaming, people upset with their worlds being flipped upside down over the course of a night.

Deadbeat dads being forced to take care of their kids, parents now without kids, left with only each other, and freshly made orphans left with worry and anxiety.

As we speed along, I think about how my mom and I will fare. I haven't given myself much of a chance to think about it, usually dismissing it since it makes me anxious, but it reminds me of when I would be younger, convinced that my parents were dead if they took a little too long to go to the store or work, cowering at the sounds of a world uncaring to a sniveling and scared little boy. Something feels off about today and a strange anxiety fills my body causing my arm hairs to stand up and be blown by the blast of the heat that has yet to turn warm. I'm sure we'll be fine, I know we still won't get much help from the government, but once I'm through with all this shit I'll get a real job, at least something so that we won't be struggling. I promise.

"Whatchu thinking about?" Alan asks, breaking me from my fugue.

"My mom and I."

"She still ain't home?"

"Nah."

"She call? Text?"

"She normally doesn't, we got that in common, it's where I get it from."

"Fair."

Once agin, the car falls silent. Him on his phone, looking at half naked women in the car and pretending as though I don't see him save it to an album labeled "college stuff," my eyes glued to the road looking for metal husks. I am once again locked in my mind, this time I'm thinking about our friendship. I know him from highschool, back in sophomore year, though I truly met him online in this one server I was in for talking about music/dickriding my favorite rappers.

Anyway, we had health class together, which in a state as conservative as mine basically amounts to learning why abstinence is important and if you have sex before marriage, you go to hell before you die. Our teacher was my old P.E. coach from middle school, convinced he had cracked the code to speaking to the youth, going from teaching kids how to do roman pushups

and three pointers to how to stay in abusive relationships and why homosexuality was not only unnatural but dangerous due to the STD's we love to spread around. I never really had any friends until he came along, most kids didn't want a homo in their group even in the foul second millennium, and I didn't want to be friends with the other gay kids since they were all rude and truth be told, very bitchy. Confined to my life of solitude, I was an easy target for ridicule, especially as I was never quiet with my love life, holding hands in public and being the only other person to stand in the school assembly when they were talking about pride month and asked all the real fruits to please stand up. Eventually, that whole thing with Alan's friend happened, and when he found out, he had his typical crisis of faith and dropped them all for the homo kid he pitied.

The closest I've had to a friend group before was that crew of junkies I rolled with a bit ago, but it was through an overdose induced moment of clarity that made me realize I slightly hated them all, both for how that treated me and what they stood for: stagnation, the true death. I think it was Shakespeare that said cowardly men die many times before they taste eternity, but I would say that death truly is just stagnation when it comes to the mind. As it is, I like to imagine myself as belonging to my understanding of the universe and the sense of self imbued within folds of grey matter and neural pathways. Life is all about growth and decay, like a worm perpetually drying out in the sun, shriveling to a black thread just to be revived and grow tenfold. I can be many things while alive, but once I die, I will forever be dead, either ceasing to exist or confined to an eternity, regardless if it be paradise or inferno, it is forever. Those fuckers who didn't even know my name represent that, dying before death, like human tumors. Even in a rhizomatic lens, the idea of doing and contributing absolutely nothing is something that sickens me, as though I don't do that still, I strive to at least grow. So long as I do not stagnate, I will not die. My body, and even my soul may betray me, but if my mind can stay intact—I think I'll be okay.

In any case, he was the only guy to be cool with me following my "exit" from that crew and my newfound "sobriety."

The feeling of rejection from everyone else was so thick you could dice it and still have to chew. Despite all that, and despite all the rumors at school no one could prove, he still chose to hang out with me. I'll never forget that, I'd say I owe him eternally, but he's told me not to think of it like that. He told me verbatim–

"I didn't even realize I was doing all that, if I did I would've made you pay for more lunches. I just thought what you said about Enrique was really funny."

He's always been real for that I won't lie. I still try to make it up to him, I always feel indebted to my friends, but even if I don't say it, I'll always stick my neck out, he's my boy until the day I fucking die I suppose. I guess I'm proving this quite well with the fact I'm on this stupid ass mission with him, driving him, and likely the one to comfort him if it turns out this shit is a bust. Like he said though, on the off chance that this is legit, the very unlikely and very small chance, we could catch a really nice break. How we'll sell a "baggie" worth of heroin is anyone's guess. I'm almost tempted to look up "What to do with heroin?" before thinking that all we'll get is just recommendations on how to inject it—in addition to getting in trouble.

I check my phone as I change the album, to my horror it's been only an hour. All these thoughts racing in my skull, all this reflection, and it has only been one hour, and twelve minutes. To what ends do I see myself reaching on this? Am I actually going to get a job when all is said and done? I don't want to if I'm honest, lord knows no matter how cool I try to look, I'm likely going to be behind a counter in khakis going "yezzir" and "nomamm!" But, I do have to grow up some time. I'm going to be 20 next year, and though I don't like to think of myself as a teen, it's less existentially horrifying than being two decades old with nothing to show for it.

I think that's what fucks with me most if I'm allowed to be honest. I've never had anyone outright sit me down and tell me I would never amount to anything. I had a few teachers in elementary school look at me and tell me I'd end up dead or in prison, which looking back is hilarious to say to a literal child. I had my dad scream at me and call me a useless, good for nothing faggot a handful of times, most of them being before he even

knew. I got the state looking at my name, my every move, just waiting for me to fuck up so I can be another write off, another boy lost, stuck catching cuts and scars behind bars. Everyone but my mom thinks I'll get caught and end up in jail, and once I get that mark of the beast on my record, it's basically over. She's the only one who knows about my poetry, Alan knows of it, but he's never read any, I think the closest he's gotten was when we got drunk and started freestyling this one time, but only she has ever read any of it.

I wrote her a little thing for mothers day, being too embarrassed to outright read it to her. I hid it in this little basket I made her, filled with sour candies and plastic flowers. She found the poem about two days later, she was watching one of her reality shows apparently, found it, and went to pick me up from school because she wanted to hug me so bad and tell me how much she loved me. I won't lie, as that memory forms, so too do my eyes start watering, I bite my lip, and breathe in. I'll be okay, she's okay, everything everywhere– will be okay.

I can't remember the poem exactly, but one of the better verses went something like:

Eyes like a fire,
Words like venom,
Can detect a liar
No sweat then end 'em.
If given the choice, I'd never pick another,
Cause already–I got the best mother.

That's lame as fuck I know, and it ain't even the whole poem, I'm a bit too embarrassed to remember the whole thing right now, there's like three verses I totally forgot. We used to perform faux rap battles with each other to say how much we loved each other. She would always call me a big strong man and rhyme man with can and land. I don't know where she left that poem though, I never saw it since I put it in her basket, but I have never made anything with as much love as I did for that poem that mother's day a year ago. Looking back, she didn't need to get my ass out of school. Was really sweet, but yeah, she picked me up, we got some sandwiches from this shitty chain shop I love, and went home to watch some made for tv horror movies

she was saving on her computer. That was probably the best day of that entire year if I'm honest. Maybe one of those day's I'll look back on, sitting on a balcony drinking beers and lament over its passing, wishing I could go back. She's always done shit like that for me, one of my other favorite memories is another time she picked me up early from elementary school since I was almost finished with this shooter game I'd always play in my room. She brought my console out to the living room, hooked it up to the big screen, surround sound and everything. Despite all the times I've told someone otherwise in an attempt to score, she really is the only person I love with all my heart. The days my dad would scream at her and make her leave were always the hardest, I've only ever felt truly alone without her, and I'll drop the act and admit that picturing her gone makes me genuinely scared. I shouldn't be thinking about this all right now.

Almost there. It's still dark, a bit after 5am, but we made it a little quicker than expected thanks to no stops and me going 100 the entire time. I'm proud to say that Alan drove his fair share, I'm very proud of him admittedly, he's almost able to drive for ten minutes without pissing his pants out of fear. The town of Jonesboro is one that embodies the cosmic horror of lower middle class america. There is nothing remarkable to this place, a labyrinth made from the bricks of suburbia, where people are grown from a vat, neurally clipped, fed their old, taught a false history, and die without knowing there is an entire world that lies beyond the rows of boarded up mom and pop shops and corners made up of foreclosed husks of fast food restaurants. It is a place that exists solely to be driven through, the fact that there's people living here must mean that whatever god above finds the pointlessness of man's suffering to be something worth laughing at. At least that's what I feel as I look upon this place. It is nauseatingly southern, I don't need to look up if this place is mostly conservative, which just adds to the mystique of this Horse guy. What would someone do to end up in a psych ward in a small town like this?

"Yo this place rocks actually." Alan says, breaking my overly harsh assessment.

"You think so?"

"For sure, I wouldn't wanna live here again too soon, but like, settle down with a fine ass bitch from the city maybe, have a kid or two, get a big ass dog. Wouldn't be too bad honestly."

Oh yeah, this is where he's from, I forget that he moved to the city sometime in middle school.

"How the hell does this place churn out you and Horseman?"

"I mean, there ain't a lot of mexicans in this town so I got made fun of a lot as a lil boy. All that shit ended up fucking up my self esteem so I went to the psychward for a bit before my folks decided a change of scenery would be better."

Clearly, one of the best decisions made in the history of humanity. God rest their souls; he continues.

"As for Headshot, don't say it in front of him, but real name–Gabriel, he's always been fucked in the head apparently."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah, he got his name cause he was thrown in the ward for shooting his neighbor's dogs and cats and shit. Didn't even know that was an offense like that. Don't even know where Horseman comes from"

"Alliteration?"

"That a place?"

"Forget it."

"Oh yeah, wait–no actually. He was arrested for breaking and entering. The story he told me was that there was this girl who rejected him so he shot her dog, cut off its head, and tried sneaking it into her room at night for some reason. Her dad caught and wrestled him down before the police came and arrested his ass."

The fact he just says this as if it's the nature of life—so casually, dumbfounds me.

"You're shitting me."

"Nope. I remember, we were in rec time, coloring like crazy, and he just tells me that story."

"Are you guys close?"

"Nah not really. I was the only guy he talked to though cause like I said, there aren't many mexicans in this town, or

hispanics I guess." He emphasizes this with his pointer up, "He's Honduran!"

"Huh..." I think about this all, but before I let myself be too into it all, I snap back to this plane of existence.

"Oh, text him we're here!"

Alan's eyes shoot up and the gears in his brain screech as they try to formulate thoughts like he forgot why we're even here like me.

"Shit, right!"

He pulls up his chat, and gets to texting, we sit in silence for ten minutes at first, then twenty, and then thirty.

"Give me the fucking news Alan!"

He grunts as his response.

"What's the fucking word man? We've been here for a solid minute."

"What? Oh-" His confused look fades away. "I texted him already."

"So is he gonna show up?"

"When he wakes probably. Hell if I know."

"He's asleep? Like right now?" I can't believe this.

"Yeah."

"Well you better go wake him up then."

"Oh! I get it, no like I said, he doesn't like to wait around, we're here so he doesn't have to."

My voice is completely dead, and I'm too shocked to emote. "You fucking with me right now?"

"I'm serious, what's not to get?"

"How long are we gonna wait then?"

He shrugs.

"I dunno, could be an hour, maybe more, I don't know his schedule."

"Well when did he last text you?"

"Midnight."

It's a quarter after 6am.

"So, assuming he gets eight hours of sleep, we got two more hours to wait."

I think he finally gets it, his eyes at least are hit with the realization.

"Oh..."

"Fuck man, I got a date today. Fuck actually, that's supposed to happen at like noon man!"

"Oh..." He does his puppy dog face. Not a cute one, but the face that a saint bernard has when you scream at it after it violently shits on the floor, not one of remorse, but sadness that you're upset at it. This face makes it exceptionally hard to be mad.

I give in, "Aw c'mon man, I don't hate you."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm just mad, I'm sorry I yelled." I say, scrunching my face.

He picks up, my words truly did fall on welcome ears, and he has once again negated any and all fury I had towards his dumbass and thus feels free of sin. And so, we wait. An hour passes, and we wait. The sun rises over the one story skyline, surprised to see us here this early, and we wait. We set up shop outside of a gas station, smoking that wine wood-tip, throwing beer bottles and pissing into storm drains and we wait. I text my date saying how we'll have to reschedule, feeling like a major asshole for it, and we wait. It isn't until 9am that we get a message from the guy. He finally wakes up and tells us where he'll be, but to give him like thirty minutes to be there and get dressed. Sure, what's thirty minutes more?

We pull up two minutes after he gets situated, it's a closed down drive-thru. The type that would sell hot dogs and slushies. The boarded up windows are caked in graffiti and torn posters paint the walls. Our salesman stands by the order window in an oversized shirt and jacket, but he's not alone. To his side is a small child, in a red hoodie, with his hands in the pocket that meanmugs the fuck out of me.

"You think that's the muscle?" Alan asks me sarcastically, but truth be told, I don't want to test this kid. My eyes are telling me he's just a little kid yeah, but I'm also thinking that if he's here, he's here for a reason. He has to be. My arm hairs stand up and I sense a primal ultraviolent hue radiate from him. A little gamma ray intent on fucking me up with its high fade bowl cut being the final thing I see should I disrespect it. I can feel in my stomach that sixth sense that my ancestors would use

to not get by cannibalistic rapist cave dwellers blaring loudly, flashing all lights and ballooning in size; the weight in my stomach is at 20 pounds now.

"Be careful, Alan, he's giving me a bad vibe."

"Oh shit?"

My fear seems to silently infect him, and subsequently my anxieties about this whole thing are palpable throughout the car, like anything else that stinks up a car other than a fart. Can't think of anything right now.

"Well," Alan begins, "I'll make the deal, say what's up, and we can go home yeah?"

I nod. There was never a chance I'd make this deal, but it's nice to hear him reassure me.

He gets out the car, leaving the door open, these kids are only like four yards away from us, they might as well be making this deal through the drive through window. Alan gives Horse the money, Horse being a chubby, red in the face 15 year old with choppy black hair. His face is round and full of flesh, he would look cute if I wasn't somewhat worried he was about to pull a gun out on the both of us. He reaches into the pocket on his polo shirt, hands Alan a baggie, and nods him away. Alan keeps it concealed in his pocket, not a single word is said throughout all of this, I think at most he nodded at the both of them, but I'm dead silent throughout. He sits in shotgun, finally closes the door, and tells me we're good to go.

There's a full minute where the both of us are silent, our eyes fixed on the road ahead, emotions subdued, I know he can sense my fear, it fills the car like black ice car fresheners, finally thought of something. Without speaking, he tells me to pull over so he can examine it.

He hangs the small bag in between his index and thumb, it looks like thick sand, and he eyes it in a way that looks as though he's counting out each grain in his mind.
He breaks the silence, "I don't think it's real."

His face is sullen, the stoicism in his stare is replaced with choked back waves of emotion.

"He fucking ripped us off."

I'm still silent, somewhat just wanting to go home, as he pulls open the glove box and reels his hand back, clutching The Piece.

His eyes are still as he holds it, looking at it like he's disassembling it with his stare alone. "I'm gonna get our money back, fuck him."

"Aye!" I interject, "C'mon man, it was only $20. Do you really wanna do something stupid over $20?"

He's shaking as he replies, "I don't know man—fuck!" His grimace is breaking through as his brow also tries to break free of his face.

We go back and forth for a few minutes, our hometown logic tells us that we should immediately go back and blast his brains out, but my reluctance to stick around, are very compelling for pacifism to be the victor today. We begin the long drive back, our enthusiasm and dollar signs in our eyes are long gone, our only other passenger in the car is the disappointment and burning sense of stupidity that stares us back in the face.
Alan does some experiments with the mystery bag. I'm almost certain it is just sand, maybe kinetic sand, but he insists it has to be something else. He rummages in the shotgun compartment for a gum wrapper, peels off the foil, and tries to light it. The contents have strange properties to them, they definitely don't burn like sand, and they emit a weird smell that I can't quite describe.

"Well, maybe it's not a total loss." I respond.

"Maybe, there's a few idiots I know that I could pawn this off on. Definitely not for a whole grand, but maybe this isn't so worthless."

"What're you thinking we could get for it?"

"Forty. Maybe sixty? I'm not sure, depends on how stupid my mark is, I know a few dummies."

I nod, trying to be positive, I tell him it's a good idea but if I'm honest I'm certain this is a complete waste. We didn't get a thousand dollars. I cancelled my date for no reason. We wasted basically a whole fucking day on this stunt. And my beautiful rest was disturbed entirely. I'm genuinely way more pissed than I'm letting on, I'm scared if Alan senses it he'll get mad again and

urge me to help him get revenge, but god damn it. It's hard not to feel like a total idiot. On the road, with nothing but the cracked open, and black asphalt looking back at me, to remind me of my atomic failures. Pacifism is a hard drug that seems to take more than it gives.

"Well, realistically, it's not like we're cut out for being dope peddlers." I say, bringing our speed up to 90.

"I think we could've done well. You be my sidekick, take the guns off the dudes, I demand the whole 50K, argue for a bit, then give them what they pay for." He throws shadow punches and makes "bop bop" noises.

"Alan." I say this part seriously, "This isn't Pusher. And even if it were, I don't think either of us are cut out for it—morally. I don't even think I'm cut out for what we do now."

He pauses, trying to construct an argument about how we're not wimpy little bitch asses who got scared off with a little Hispanic boy in a hoodie with a mean face. "Fair. I'll see what I can do about getting us gas money at least."

As we speed along I see something unbelievable, my mother's car driving down this country ass road, but she's nowhere in it. Something familiar takes over me, like a cold breeze gliding over my skin, and I pull back to begin tailing this car.

"You good?" Alan sees the look in my eyes and emotion leave my face as the worst possible scenarios flood my mind.

"That's my mom's car. She ain't the one driving though, and I don't know who the fuck is."

He's silent for a bit before saying–

"What do you wanna do?"

Fuck around yet I say, "Find out."

"Okay." He knows.

Stalking the dark blue coupe takes about 12 minutes before it pulls into a garage belonging to a house on a corner. I don't get a good look at the driver, but I was able to see his face enough so that as rage fills my heart I have a face to attach to this devil. I park across the street and take The Piece from Alan before walking to the house. I pound on the door, The Piece in my back waistband, and I pound until it opens. How quickly the wax

of pacifism melts in the glare of boiling rage. A muscular black man with his head smooth and voice deep answers, his body peeking from the door.

"Can I help you?"

"You kill my mom?"

"The fuck?" He immediately furrows his brow and before I can act on instinct, my hand already going for it—he takes out a gun and points it at my face, "Who the hell are you?"

Well shit, what am I gonna do against a gun? I immediately turn around and start walking back before I'm ordered to the ground, my belly on his surprisingly well taken care of lawn, my mind tends to focus on strange things when I have a gun in my face. If I didn't have a gun pointed at me, I would've whistled while I walked to play it real cool, to really sell the idea that I just don't give a fuck even though (I admit) I kinda do.

"Answer me."

"David!" Alan screams, fear in his voice.

"Oh shit." I can hear this man's embarrassment and voice pitch up a few octaves, "I'm sorry man."

I look up and see him putting his gun back in his waist, before extending his hand out to me. The cold look on his face gone, replaced with genuine concern.

He invites 'the dude in my car' and I inside, Alan asks to stay outside, but I convince him in and then we venture into the lion's den, setting both our guns are on the table, I eye them anxiously. His house smells of incense, candles and weed, and is littered with various posters and pictures of Hendrix, Gil Scot Heron, and other black artists to watch over us. In the corner behind the couch he sits on is what looks to be a shrine with various photos of Malcom X and the black panthers above it interrupted with a small banner of Mao and those soviet guys I can't remember the names of.

"Before anything, can I ask what that is?"

"You a cop?" I make sure to ask.

"No."

"It's a 3-D printed gun." I reply, making it clear that's all I'll say.

"Right."

There's a moment of silence before he starts again.

"So Davey, I imagine you're here about your mother."

My face morphs before I can talk, "Only my mom calls me that," he takes that as a response.

"I ain't hurt her if that's what you're thinking."

He walks to another room before coming back with a box, on the top is my mother's wallet. Underneath her wallet lie gold letters that say "Without the people's army, the people have nothing."

"I'm sure I don't have to say it."

He doesn't.

"I already filed it with the city, they cleared me if that helps you believe it. I always knew Zahra was an angel, but shit..."

"She's really gone?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"We were both in bed asleep, she was going to go home the next morning, I woke up to her being lit up, and then dust or some shit all over my bed. I tried to gather up as much as I could in the tin in the box. I'm sorry Dave, for what it's worth."

"She talk about me?"

"Always, whenever we would talk about our goals she would mention you in some way. You have no idea how proud she was—is of you." A brief second of silence, "She ever mentioned me?"

"She referred to you as one of her friends."

"Damn I'm still 'just a friend?'" I have to stop myself, the pain is beginning to set in despite how hard I try to deny it entry. "Guess that's on me for trying to play it cool." A look of regret and disappointment washes over his face, resting upon the shoreline of his lips.

I nod and ask him, "So what is your name?"

"Robbie."

"Cool." I don't really have anything to say. I don't think I even could. The massive lump in my throat suffocates me as much as it silences me, and I'm actively trying to keep my voice steady.

"I don't really know what to say," he sits next to me. "I've gone over this so many times in my head and it ain't anything like I expected. I don't wanna sound like I don't care, or that I know what it's like. I never had a kid of my own. I don't know what I'm saying honestly, but I feel for you little man."

"I don't know what it's like, to be in your shoes exactly, but when I lost mine I felt so small. I was a lil younger than you, but I still remember the last time I saw her. My aunts told me her condition was getting worse and that she wanted to see me before she couldn't bear to let me see her. The last time we talked I asked her what she would do if she got better. She said she would buy a liter of good gin and dance with my dad until his knees gave out." He smiled. "She never did get better, but she was always so hopeful and positive about everything. Your mom was the same way, we met at work a few years ago, I always liked her, it wasn't until she saw me out of uniform that she gave me the time of day. When I told Zahra about my mom, she told me she felt that. Said that death ain't nothing she would worry about, so long as her son and sisters remember her fondly, she would be fine with anything that came next. That was a talk we had a while ago but I think that's the night I told her how crazy I was about her."

He looks at me again.

"Oh."

"What's up?"

The denial has worn off.

And just like that—the world ceases to carry on outside these four walls. It's all coming now. Four walls is all that contains reality, all of creation condensed within 900 square feet as the underlying melody of outside is replaced by a deafening silence. I try to move, but paralysis overcomes and freezes me still as muffled and distorted noise comes from the muted blurs that were once people, its eyes a milky and pus colored off-white and its shape poorly contained and contoured; it looks more like a CRT fuzz than a human right now and it speaks to me—

something that I can't hear. I can't hear. I can't speak. I can't breathe. I need to breath; but I can't breathe. I am a despicable and dried worm turning beneath the hateful glare of the sun and though I can feel the world spit on me I cannot react to it. My mouth is fused together like melted plastic shopping bags on the highway, and the harder I try the more it feels as though there is this blockage over my face, stuck to my skin and just thick enough that I can't get any oxygen in. My head is swimming. I can feel the pain in my fingers creeping through my body like venom, like molten lava infused venom injected under my fingernails with bamboo splints creeping through my veins with tiny sharp legs and whiskers and when it gets to my heart I'm going to die. In only a moment, the walls that contain reality fall back and outside the limits of the universe a horde of demons does not come that slit the throats of these fuzz beings and hold my eyes open as I watch them vivisect these once familiar shapes and begin on me—cutting my stomach open and pulling me apart with sheer strength. Instead, I am sat motionless and staring at the man who has told me I will never see my mother again.

Pain.

Pain is all I can feel, and all I can describe. Each swallow has the weight of lead and I have to force them all down, my leg is bouncing pathetically trying to remind me I'm still alive—and in a moment like this, living seems so exhausting.

How easy it must be to float along in an ocean of oblivion. No suffering, no self, no consciousness. Were humans meant to suffer so? Is this what we were molded for? I look at my sweating palms, tracing the lines and ridges among them with my eyes, trying to distract myself from where I am but all it does is further isolate me into my echo chamber, where from every direction and all voices upon the council—each one now twisted into neon colored demons, the only thing I can hear is "YOUR MOTHER IS DEAD." Alongside the distorted laughter from the world at my suffering.

"Why are you smiling?" Nobody asks me. "Your mother is dead."

You alright? I hear something say.

I try to not open my mouth, I don't want anyone to see me cry, but all my efforts result in is me giving a strained and puzzled look, like my mouth is full of yogurt and I'm trying not to let any out but the harder I try, the more insane I look, and I cough up a grunt that vaguely sounds like a Muppet monster screaming "Mh-hm"

I'm shaking as he holds me, this man I've met only minutes ago, I'm trying not to get snot all over his sweater and failing horrendously as he pats my back and tells me it's okay. That it feels like the world is ending and that this is as close as it'll feel and that I'll make it through because that's what she wants and that I'm strong enough and that I did good and this and that and some thing that sounds poetic but doesn't do anything and this other thing that sounds really plain and dumb but does make me feel a bit better but what really snaps me out of my idiot doom spiral is when he says:

"You must allow your heart be on fire, and your brain to be set upon some ice."

"What?"

"'Lest emotion betray you, the liar,

You must be willing to cool the mind twice."

In unison, we don't say:

"For reason is virtue, truest of all.

The most important thing to man, is man.

Together we stand; alone we will fall,

Much like the hourglass or beach's sand."

But I wish I could. Instead, I just sob for an unexpected amount of time into this man, profusely apologizing and thanking him as much as I can, in between breaths and gasps as he cycles through the usual script that people go through in times like this.

I'm here for you.

I'm so sorry.

You will make it through this.

I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am.

I can't imagine what you're going through.

I can't make it through this.

I can't.

I don't think I will.

Dear god—it's like I've drunk venom. Each swallow of snot and tears feels more painful than the last, and each breath is more forced and difficult to attempt.

It'll be alright.

It's going to be hard.

But you got this.

I don't think I do.

But you do.

On one hand, it feels as though a huge weight has been lifted off my chest now that I know my mom's fate, but on the other it's like that weight was fashioned into a club used to bludgeon me. I bite my lip, trying not to explode into a whirlwind

of emotion. There's so much going on inside of me, an entire universe of thought runs rampant, each having their own lives and succumbing to the absolute worst I could possibly conjure up right now. I feel so scared, I'm truly alone, she ain't coming home, I'll never see her again, I don't have a mom anymore, one of my best friends, the woman who made me who I am, at least the good parts; I think of my dad and this fear that wraps itself around my heart in a bondage of thorns is only amplified. I'm terrified that he'll escape and come back home and no one will be there to protect me. I feel like a kid again, so scared and so small. It is as though the world itself just grew exponentially too quick as soon as I was unable to keep denying the truth, with me staying the same size. I feel this look of fear on my face, and I think Robbie can see it plain as day. I stammer out an "Okay." And through some blur of existence I find myself back behind the wheel, sniffling and choking back tears as Alan sits pressed against his seat as though I'm slamming on my brakes too late and we're about to end up twisted in someone's bumper. He ain't know what to say—and neither do I. We've been silent the whole time as I feel as though if I try to talk, an ocean will flood the earth. I'm trying my best to hold it all back, concentrating on it so hard that I can't even pay attention to the empty roads. I have no idea if I would've been better off not knowing, but the news about my mom at least completely takes my mind off of us most definitely getting scammed. Right now I couldn't give less of a shit about money, or anything.

Alan sideeyes me and grabs the phone, nothing is playing despite it being hooked up, and he asks me if he can play something, I nod. He unplugs my phone and connects his, presses play on a playlist and by the first couple of seconds and piano keys–I know what it is. I seclude myself within my impenetrable cerebral fortress, trying to stay strong in my castle of misery, but then the chorus of my third favorite song of all time starts and Alan joins in, playing his air keys to the tee.

Alan clears his expression, as though the spotlight were on him, and he sings to me, voice cracking and from the heart: "You–you got what I nee-eed. But you say he's just a friend," With the next line, he breaks down the stone pillars of my castle, "Oh

you say he's just a friend." and then drags me out into the blinding light to sing the entirety of the rest of the song as though my life depended on it, screaming "Oh baby you!" with tears welling in my eyes as the emotional slushie within me flows through me. Visions of my mother smiling fill my mind as I pathetically cry and sing the song as best as I can through choked sobs. It forces me to pull over and rest my head on the steering wheel as snot shoots out of my nose and slobber flies out of my mouth, still not following my commands for silence.

Alan sings to me quietly until the next song plays, my second favorite song that my mom showed me more than a decade ago on a hot spring afternoon after a field trip–Here Comes Your Man by The Pixies. It forces a flood of pain through me worse than any bullet can as I remember her dancing with me to it and kissing me on my cheeks as she would say how I will always be her favorite man, something that only now I am grateful didn't end when I was a little kid. How did this even get queued up I wonder. I grab Alan's phone and open it up to reveal we're listening to a playlist called "David's Jams" that is indeed filled with my favorite songs, the description of the playlist reads "Happy friendsversary David! You're my best friend and I love you! :D"

As I read the description, Alan holds my shoulder and says to me, "It was gonna be your gift for next week but hey? Figured it would make you feel better." He smiles as I sniffle. "I care about you a lot David, and it might not be the same, but remember when it was the other way?"

I manage to choke back coughs and sobs to say, "Yeah—didn't you shit yourself from crying so hard?"

He laughs and apologizes, "Just pissed." He squeezes my shoulder, "I'll always be here for you David. Never doubt that."

...

After an eternity in the car, oceans of pain fought back yet flooding the streets, we back up into his driveway.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

Alan says, sighing.

"I have my date."

"Well, after then, if you want, I'll be hanging with Jesse."

"I'll call you."

"Text me when you get home, yeah?"

I nod, and get out of the car, slamming the door. I stick my earbuds in and start the long trek back with Robbie's box in my arms, ignoring the neighborhood border patrol as they try to goad me. It's embarrassing for me to admit, but I listen to the entirety of In Rainbows by Radiohead as I stew around in my emotions. The backdrop of the city goes by in a blur, whirling past, I notice nothing until my door steps up to me. The box is a little heavy, but I bring it home regardless, put my mom's dust in a tin that isn't for coffee, and search through her wallet to make sure he didn't steal her cards. Through a mess of cards and vouchers I find the poem I wrote for her, I read it, and cry, wishing for anything that she would walk through the door. I leave her gun and shirt in the box as I sit on the recliner in near darkness, the TV plays what's essentially white noise, something goes on but my mind is in too much of a rush to even pay attention, the only thing I'm focused on is that front door and hoping she'll walk through, until I hear Anthony licking her nose.

"Have I told you the news yet, baby girl?"

She doesn't respond.

"She's not coming home, she got taken or something, she's in that box right up there."

She still doesn't respond. Her face folds and rests wearily upon her paws.

"If I pretend hard enough, could I pretend you were responding to me?"

No response.

"What if I pretend really hard and acknowledge that it's not really happening, what then?"

My childhood best friend is no longer a dog, but a tall burly and hairy man with his ass in the air, face in his hands, and in a somewhat cheap, scratchy looking dog costume.

"Maybe David, but what good is something untrue like this?"

"Gives me someone to talk to, and right now I feel like that's what I need." Each sentence I can force out is punctuated by sniffs, and as I wince in agony I can taste metal from my

chewed lips, as though the bullet that I feel has struck me rests between them and draws blood.

"Perhaps, what do you even have to talk about? Was Robbie not enough?"

"No." I reflect back on that. "I can't open my heart up to some stranger, shit I don't even know why he did, it was a bit weird."

"Since when was honesty out of pocket? Aren't you always saying that above all else you aim to be genuine?"

"Yeah, but venting to some kid you barely met?"

"What difference does it make? In any case, you're not even a kid anymore, in the eyes of the law you're an adult."

"I'm not an adult yet. Not like that at least."

"No, you are." He begins to sit up, "You and I both know that, you've been saying that you are, and now that you're treated like one you want to back out? That's not how it works."
The realization hits me like a semi. Holy shit. I live alone now, is this my mom's house, or is it mine?

"David, look at me." She commands, scratching her ear, "You need to swallow this truth, however much you don't want to, you're a man now, whether or not you want to be, this is your life, Mom can't hold your hand through everything. Even I won't be with you forever."

"Please don't say that."

"I'm an old girl now. My joints hurt when I hop off the bed, you can't even walk me anymore."

This simple truth burns more than I expected it to. It's almost surreal to think now. My reality doesn't feel concrete, as though at any given moment I may just slip through and phase out of existence if I'm not careful enough, or wake up if I willed it hard enough. Though that would beg the question, if it's all a dream, who would be dreaming?

"It's okay David, you knew this was going to be tough. Is that not why I'm speaking now?" She gets up and paws at my leg while on all fours.

"I didn't expect it to be like this."

"What's that you always say? The best laid plans—"
I finish her sentence, "Of mice and men oft go astray."

“That’s right.” She hops up and sits on my lap, the recliner is too small to sit this large man and I comfortably, but I don’t dare disturb this, even as she knocks the wind out of me and I catch my breath. “I can’t tell you anything you don’t already know.”

“I wouldn’t want you to.”

“Then you already know what you want from me, yet you’re still scared.”

I am.

“I just want you to be here, as my friend. Right now—I feel so alone.”

She paws at me as she says, “I can do that, until my last breath, but you’re not just worried about me, tell me.”

“I’m scared of disappointing her. If she really did get taken by some god I’m scared she’ll look down and judge me for everything.”

“What, as though this isn’t enough to judge you for? Said the dog to the man.”

“I’m scared I’ll fail her, that I’ll fail myself.”

“How will you fail yourself?”

“One day, I’ll grow old, long after you’re gone, and I’ll have looked back to see all my time wasted. I’m almost 20, I’m alone now, and I haven’t done anything. I’m scared I’m already failing you.”

“Oh David–” Anthony kisses me on the cheek. “You know what I ask of you, my one request?”

“Feed you and not beat you?”

“That too, but sit with me and be my friend. You’re made in god's image according to those that are religious, or to the atheists you are made of the cosmos. You are either made to be god of your own world, or are infinity itself.”

She grunts.

“I don’t think it’s enough for me to exist though. Shouldn’t I have done something by now to at least earn my meaning?”

“The idea of existence preceding essence is useful for schools of existentialist thought, but only when the question

itself is 'what is the meaning of life?' What if it's not the question you should be asking?"

"Why would that not be the question?"

"Well, why would a life in process need a concrete question like that? These are extraordinary times, this is a new world we live in, maybe things won't change on a social scale, but for you, it's already begun, perhaps the whole point for your life is to simply live it."

"Just live it? And do nothing at all?"

"No. Live it the way you want to, when it is eventually your time, you'll have time to reflect back and decide your meaning then, if you don't have time, I don't think you'll need to worry about it. How could you possibly analyze a book without reading it all the way through? You can annotate and theorize, but you won't know the real point until it's over, and you're stewing over it all in your head in darkness or otherwise. Every great general started off as a lowly foot soldier, every artist with sketches in a notebook, and every pope with a question of faith."

Huh. I didn't expect that. I put my hand on her chin and I blink, once I open my eyes my dog is once again just that. My hand on the underside of her chin, scratching her cheek. No more pretending, no more going off script. I sit in silence, I think of one's life who's already over, and wonder what was that point. Maybe there was none, maybe there was, it's over now, and I don't think I'm the kind of person that can assign meaning to an entire human's existence. As I reflect, I realize my favorite song ever made in the history of man is playing on the TV, despite me not arranging for that, and those signature keys play in the exact sequence that if it were any louder—it would unveil the lines of the life and death matrices and awaken the great sleeper. I close my eyes in an attempt to savor these notes, like ambrosia burning the tip of my tongue, the cymbals begin whispering their prelude to gnosis into my eardrums, mathematically perfected and executed to soak into my cochlea without the slightest misstep.

As the backing vocals open, so too do my eyes unto a crowd blanketed in the fog of voyeurism, standing in rigid rows. Bodies and faces of such a high number that I can't recognize

any of them as human, they simply exist as a great beast, a forest of flesh. I stand above untold hundreds, maybe thousands, atop a great stone temple, my head feels heavy not only from emotions but the thing I wear on it. I think it's a crown, it's grand and as colorful as the rest of my clothes, the people below are a wash of dark earthy tones and some are lined with jade jewelry, the man beside me has a deep scowl as the crowd sings of a sound much deeper than the sea. Between us and the crowd I see four beautiful women in all manner of costumes moving to the beat in unison, angels of the earth draped in red and green feathery necklaces, their naked bodies barely hidden under layers of bright paint, all as a young boy adorned in flowers and paint walks up the stairs. It's when our eyes meet that I realize I'm not myself, or at least not the version I last saw, my hands are calloused and wrinkled, my skin is darker and beneath the jaguar skin braces, my wrists are scarred and burnt in patterns and shapes.

The young boy looks me in the eye, and through his mask I see certainty, and in his hands I see a snapped flute as he marches up the stairs with the sense of honor and duty that would get a blizzard of medals. He is going to die, and by some divine horror it is the blade in my hand that will cut open his chest and rip out his heart, but there is no fear in his eyes. He knows what's coming, and he has no fear. As he reaches the top, he begins to undress and prop himself upon the altar, we have four men ready to seize him but he shoos them away, with the flicking of his hand suspended in the air, he tells us:

"Other night, I look up." He cocks his head at me,

"Dreamin' to the signs that take me far into space."

He takes off his mask, and through paint and jade piercings, I can tell it's the Me I'm used to, and he continues "Then, again, I hear it."

The crowd goes from staring at him to looking straight into me as they answer with, "That—sigh."

He lies down, ready for the blade as they continue singing and the women continue on. They cock their arms and extend them like machines in unison, understanding each chord and note in this song, swinging their hands to the melody and

shaking their heads in solemn grooves. I prepare to make the incision but as I draw the smallest drop of blood, darkness overtakes the world. I look up and see Armageddon, and I can hear The Sigh. The end of days is coming, the gods are furious and soon all of the world will be swallowed whole, teeth upon teeth upon teeth gnashing and grinding in preparation for the soil to become drenched in blood—except it won't. The man next to me, draped in his own outfit of prints and feathers and paints and gold smiles—for he knows what's happening, and I do too. The eclipse blocks out the sun yet the people keep singing, if this is the end, they think, why not sing? Their ignorance is a blessing, for I know why this is happening, and am in fact relieved as darkness falls, yet they don't and their courage reverberates through the heavens, from my air of nobility I think of them as content savages—stupid yet happy, but there isn't enough arrogance to hide my envy, my envy that in turn reveals my feeling of inferiority. They do not question the whims and wills of the world, they merely accept it and do not let it get in their way of life. The lion does not sit and ponder the ethics of eating young gazelles, it will crush the skull of infants and claw apart entire kingdoms long before it will ever stop to consider what it's doing, there's something about that I wish I had. I drive the blade deeper and the boy before me sings again, staring upward:

"Other night, I look up.

Dreamin' to the stars that take me far into space.

Then, again, I hear it."

On cue, I can't stop myself from growling in unison with the crowd, "That—Sigh."

Then, through muscle and wet flesh, as crimson essence sprays out, his heart beats softly in my palm and the crowd goes hysterical as though it's their wardrum, singing the chorus and finally shifting from their limestone poses. Bits of tissue and gunk stick to it, trying in vain to keep it inside his chest. The sun returns, it plays its game, and I play mine. The boy continues singing as his heart beats slower and slower to match the tempo, eyes rolled back and mouth still trying to sing through death rattles. Four muscular men with slicked hair carry him away and as I look up to the sun in its blinding, cocky glory.

I can see a figure descend to the earth draped in painfully bright yellow robes and a seven pointed golden crown—reminiscent of a lion's mane, and into the center of the crowd. He does not look up from the ground. They descend upon him with fists and feet, howling and screaming and shrieking and crying and growling and snarling and—praying. Amidst the chaos I hear a woman say thanks for the earth, whether she means that she is grateful for the planet or she is its spokesperson I cannot tell. I descend the steps, past the entourage carrying the now limp body and look upon the sky's idol. He's smiling with teeth the color of rubies. He isn't dead, and it will never be dead. So long as the earth remains—it will.

My hand has dried blood on it, and I've not bled. What the hell do I even make of that? It's times like this where I get unnecessarily mad at the idea of "Oh the author meant the curtains are fucking blue." But truly, what am I supposed to gather from all of that? I feel as though I'm going schizophrenic and perhaps the meaning of that is that I will be having full blown psychosis soon.

Nobody says, "Tomorrow is not promised nor will it wait." And yet the words are branded into my brain. I'm back on earth soon after, get out of my throne, put my mom and I's stinky clothes in the washer, of course forgetting to start it, and go to bed. The outside world is so loud tonight, I hear every bird, every howl of the wind, purr of the cars going down the street, this is my house now, any intruder will be mine to deal with, I eye my mother's gun steadily. A G30 generation 4, recently cleaned, can I even kill a man with this? Am I a killer? Can I live with myself as is? These questions bounce around my skull as I cook up hypotheticals all night. I don't think I'll be blasting anyone that steps in, but maybe if they tried to hurt Anthony or me, take my mom's shit, or are armed with their own weapon. I almost shit my pants when I hear what sounds like footsteps inching closer to my door, only to find out it's Anthony. I wonder if she thinks I'm crazy, she curls up next to me and immediately falls asleep.

I wonder if I should talk to her some more but then I hear her snores, the light drips of saliva pepper me and lull me to sweet nothingness.

I wake up in a cold sweat and start the washer. I stare up at the popcorn ceiling trying my hardest to come up with some argument to dispute what I already know. Thinking that maybe if I deny it hard enough, it won't be true. The pain comes in waves, every so often it'll feel as though I can start to compose myself and then I'll imagine her face, think of holding her hands in the store, hearing her voice, feeling her safety.

I'm unable to dream, I barely sleep. I suppose journalists don't write about planes that don't crash, and I don't get horrified over no dreams I don't have.

FREDAG

Pain.

Ceaseless, bitter, pain.

It's a metallic and sour taste, with bitter notes that stain the roof of my mouth, and it's as painful as swallowing molten lead.

The world didn't end last week, but in this moment, I wish it did—it sure feels like it did at least. White sand beaches and vibrant coastal cities could get washed away for all I care, drowned in crude oil spills, and stripped bare of life. Birds can fall from the sky and the animals can scream their final song before collapsing from the foul winds and hail of fire. A mountain of pure blight may be thrown into the seas and boil the fish alive. It would all be less painful than the black hole in my stomach that gnaws at my heart. I haven't managed to sleep. This house feels massive, along with this earth, and I feel so fucking small. As I've said—in a word, pain.

I can't bring myself to do it. Try as I might, this blanket and everything is too much. My phone goes off so many times these next few hours. Anthony scratches at my door begging me to let her out or feed her but I can't. I can't do anything. It all seems impossible and I think it is. I can't even force myself to sleep. All I can do is be at the mercy of the same few scenarios running through my head and imagining how the state is going to give my dad this house for some reason and how I'm going to be homeless and end up raped and murdered or overdose on some shit because I'm just a worthless fucking druggie fag who will never do anything with his life and-

"Breathe."

A command, not a suggestion, and as such, I obey.

"Sleep."

Again, not a suggestion. I yawn, turn over, feel the cool wind on my skin and try to fight it, but I'm too weak and my eyes flutter close. The world goes quiet for the first time today, but it isn't darkness that overtakes it. Instead, golden glitter outlines

reality, everything is awash and speckled with twinkling royal hues of gold and light itself comes out as a soft pastel blue.

"Sleep my child, for your life is not doomed." So says the gargantuan woman, holding my bedroom in the palm of her hand. The roof has fizzled away and I can see her eyes as she watches me, they're filled with sadness. Her features are sharp yet beautiful, and I can't help but adjust to be more comfortable.

"I am sorry for what has happened to you little one."

I'm too tired to speak back—actually no, it's not exhaustion anymore, but like a great peace has been injected into my veins and has flooded my brain.

"I know my words do not mean too much, but I hope this will help you. You need rest? Then come to me and I will give you rest."

The blanket sits on me, weighted to feel like a lover's leg thrown over in the dead of night, and the softest saxophone plays in the distance. I sob in bed for who knows how long. Beyond my bedroom and her lie infinite fields of flowers that stretch in every direction. I can't see what they are but for some reason I know they're daffodils. They dance in the haze, swaying in the breeze, knowing nothing but love and each other even as a warm thunderstorm rages far up above. The droplets feel like warm honey and taste of chocolate milk.

"Weep my child. Weep, for you have known love." She says with a hint of pride, but not for me.

How long have I been here?

"As long as you would like. Tomorrow is always a new day, but my gift to you is a new today. With love, David."

And just like that, I open my eyes, sure as shit, today's just started. No new messages, no scratching at the door, nothing. A new day is here; it always has been.

I don't want to crawl out of bed, these past few days have finally hit me and I'm overcome with such dread and exhaustion that 'long' doesn't even feel like a good way to describe it. It's been more heavy honestly, that's a fucking solid descriptor. This past week has not been so slow, but more so something that feels like if it were to be any more than it already is, my joints and ligaments would snap beneath it. Heavy. I notice Anthony isn't

beside me, and instinctively I go to feed her a serving of dry food with an egg on top since I doubt I'll eat breakfast. The old girl eats every last bite, and because she's been so supportive I give her another cup which she licks the top of, before returning to look outside. The fog that I've gotten used to these past days has finally dissipated, leaving behind nothing but puddles that take refuge in the cracks and potholes in the roads and amidst the green blades, and an ominous army of clouds that lie above, ready to lay siege, scorched and burning away like memories.

I lose myself for only a moment until I'm reminded I have my date today. I check my messages and see that he didn't even message me back after he saw it. Ouch.

I meander for a bit before I go to finally start the washer and then check the mail, something I meant to do on Wednesday. Mostly just junk and coupons, but as I step back inside to leave them on my table, I see that envelope for my mom I brought in at the beginning of the week. I open it up and it tells me everything I already know, as though Uncle Sam himself saw fit to tell me my mom is never coming home and I will never see her again, all that's missing is the folded flag. There's some official signatures confirming her disappearance under "unknown circumstances" and a folder full of documents that I don't want to read now, so I step into the shower and wash the days away in stone-faced apathy to the world. It's mostly the same thoughts in my head but I keep going back to them as an act of self harm.

I'm thinking of how absolutely not horny I am and how the date probably would have been a bust, even if I was successful in getting to bed Sam Rockwell. I have to be honest and admit I've never had sex, I've done hand stuff, but I am still a virgin. I guess that will have to wait for the time being. I play out a date in my head, imagining a whole scene in which I say a few good lines, but ultimately it's very uninteresting and doesn't go anywhere since I legit can't think of much right now so I'll skip over the details. I have trouble picturing it today, my mind is running at 60% processing power. All of the other people in the restaurant lack any distinct faces and are more so just masked in morph suits, some are even green and yellow. It's not even worth going into detail over.

I promise that not much is missed in my omission.

I sit in my living room in silence as I wait for my hair to dry and think about this all. The disappointment that rushes through me is so bitter, I think I can literally taste it. All corners of my mouth have this metallic sensation lingering, it's like venom, but in some masochistic way it's enjoyable. I look at Anthony, about three feet from where I last saw her, and ask if she's got any wisdom for this.

Silence is all she replies with.

"Not even some metaphor for me?"

"What you're meaning to say is idiom."

Whatever.

"And no, but don't forget about the clothes in the wash. Dryer still doesn't work just so you know."

Oh shit that's right. I, overconfident in my actions, open the dryer panels up, and give it a quick look at the insides as though I'm some underpaid mortician. Obviously I have no idea what I'm even looking for and push it back as I put a pin in this. I put my hands on my hips and think about what I can do. I could go to a laundromat, maybe go to my neighbors a little way down the street, but I look up and see some clothespins and lines and finally, I go to dry these damn clothes.

It takes me about twenty minutes to hang everything up, some towels and pants I hang up on doors to dry, but aside from that, this behemoth of a task is finally getting finished. The day is a partially cloudy, somewhat temperate day, at a solid 68 degrees according to my weather app. There's a calm wind that blows trying to calm down a crying baby, it makes the clothes almost dance as they finally escape this soggy kerfuffle they've been in. My hoodies and socks and shirts and pants and mom's bras and my undies hang as I wonder if there's a good metaphor I can make of this. Nothing comes to mind, but the sun peers out from behind the clouds for the first time all week. Its light is shining and warming my skin. I'm airing out my dirty laundry.

For some reason, a sense of duty fills me and I step back inside and clear a junk shelf full of various knick knacks that have better homes and books that most definitely should have been put away months ago. There lies a DVD case of this film that

we started last week, but never got around to finishing. It's about these three french guys and in black and white. We were supposed to finish it this week as it's one of my mom's favorite films and I owe her after showing her one of mine the other day. I realize what this shelf would be good for, and loot my mother's room for photos of her, her favorite clothes, drawings of us, and little pieces to commemorate her. The shrine to my mother is almost complete, full of her favorite books, films, and anything else I can think of that she loved, until I remember her gun. I hold it in my hand and think about all her times telling me it isn't a toy and how to use it. It feels heavy and awkward in my hands, and while I know I may one day have to use it, I set it on the top to be seated upon plastic flowers, and it waits for the day I grow into it. Fingers wrinkled enough to fit the grooves within.

Golden beams of light make their way through the blinds and make the dust around her shrine glow. She looks so soft in her photos, even when I look at the photos of her younger than I, I feel safe. In memory of my mother, I kneel and think of everything I could say. I'm sad she's gone, I feel betrayed that she would leave me, I would give anything to have her back, and suddenly, a bitter taste spills onto my tongue and down my throat, I know she will never be back, and while that's not okay, it will be. I will be okay. I don't see my mother's ghost or hear her voice or feel her presence, but I feel the lump in my throat break down slightly by only a piece. The truth is a little easier to swallow.

Suddenly, I remember I have friends and call up Alan to see what he's up to, and the way he talks makes it obvious he's high as a kite.

He shouts "I'm with Jesse right now!" Away from the phone, someone laughs at something there, and I ask if they can pick me up.

"Shit, hell yeah we can." Alan excitedly responds before I hear his hushed voice ask and say yay a moment after.

In the time between, I go into the snack cabinet and dig around for something to take the edge off as I drank my last beer a couple of days ago. I find a bottle of gin, and pour it into a plastic cup a third of the way with some tonic and ice, my mother's favorite drink and just about the only real drink I can

make that isn't shitty whiskey and apple juice. It tastes like a christmas tree and the tonic sticks to my teeth, but I squeeze in a lime and it becomes much smoother. I stick a lid and straw on and sip while I wait for my sweet prince. A few sips in, and it actually isn't that bad.

They arrive ten minutes after I've changed into a hoodie and some shorts, my signature look back in highschool. Jesse greets me with both a handshake and a few hits from his blunt, wrapped with what I can only guess is a mango flavored wrap. They're listening to something kinda jazzy and I get situated in the back of Jesse's Charger and pass my drink.

"Motherfucking David, Alan told me about yall's odyssey yesterday, how'd that go?"

"Not well man, had a bad feeling from the getgo about it."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, I had my little shivers going crazy from the start." He looks at me, confused. "Just moments of lucidity, I don't think I have intuition but I mean, I get my gut feelings ya know?"

He's holding back laughter as he says, "Motherfucker–you mean thinking? Is that what you're on about?" He quickly guffaws, "Man, I played Disco too, I know where you got that from." Busted. Oh well.

I change the subject to hide my embarrassment, "How's Muhammad been actually? You guys are close."

Alan interjects, and I notice he's not wearing his golden cross necklace anymore–probably 'in between faiths' again, "Fuck Muhammad."

"Wait which one do you mean?" Jesse asks, "The one who gets his sides cleaned up by Fatima?"

I answer his question with another, "Which Fatima? The stoner or the hot one?"

"The stoner is the only one I know." He answers. There is unfortunately a difference between the stoner and the hot one, and she's kind of a bitch.

"Yeah that one." I reply.

Alan takes back his curse as Jesse answers, "Oh that one, yeah he's chilling, his family is doing alright, even with

recent events." He takes a drag, "Same with everyone, lost some folks, awkward as fuck trying to hang out–but they're strong and smart about this. They're chilling. Speaking of, how are you?"

"Cooling man, you?"

"Been better, I know that ain't true though." Jesse looks at Alan, who purses his lips and looks plainly at me.

"Yeah, you ain't wrong."

"Well, spill your woes brother, we ain't doing shit but smoking and chatting today. Can't legally go to the titty bar still."

"Well, I just got out of a date, pretty awkward to say the least." Play along.

"Ooo shit!" Jesse's eyebrows raise to match the excitement in his voice, "Who had the misfortune of fumbling you?"

"You know Sam?"

"Which one, there's a few?"

"The soccer player."

"Yeah yeah, what about him?"

"Well I just got home after an awkward ass date, all he wanted to do was talk about himself and be all gross and yeah..." I check to see if he and by extension anyone else is listening, he is, but he's opening up his phone and checking something. He eggs me on to continue, and I do so until he interrupts me.

"You mean this Sam right?" He asks, showing me his social media page.

"Yeah..."

"That's really interesting man. He's been posting all day to his close friends about his time in Montgomery, like not even 20 minutes ago." He eyes me up and down, and being backed into the corner like this, I am forced to admit the truth to not only him but to you too.

In all honesty, this isn't the first thing I've exactly—I don't wanna say lied about, this Sam thing sure but I mean, I don't want to come across as an asshole. Maybe I've left out some aspects of my day to day, the uninteresting, the unflattering, maybe I've said a few things that were more hurtful than necessary to those I loved and didn't feel the need to remember. Maybe my mom wasn't exactly so supportive of me at first, but

these are all inconsequential at this moment. They simply would have muddied up this incoherent mess that has been my week. Thinking about that actual day I came out stings hard as hell, even if that disappointment from her wasn't for long.

"Alright, you caught me."

"Damn right I did, little fucker." He shakes his head and clicks his tongue as he wags a finger in my face.

"Naughty naughty David, thou shall not bullshit thy brother."

I nod my head along and roll my eyes.

Jesse beckons my attention, "Hey, don't be acting all stoic just cause I caught your ass, I don't even know why you'd lie about some shit like that."

"Seems less humiliating than admitting I ain't been up to shit lately."

"By what margin? You know I ain't got up to nothing, still driving this beat up ass car, hell, my radio don't even work no more, ain't you notice?" He points at his middle console and opens it, pulling out a Bluetooth speaker that's the source of the funky ambiance in here.

He continues, "C'mon David, ain't no shame, so long as you're happy and whatever, just look at Alan, man ain't have any action since Delilah broke up with him, motherfucker knows what he is, fat sunnovabitch."

Alan finally breaks his vow of silence to curse Jesse out and the two punch each other in the arms while laughing, as I simply watch.

"Can I get another hit?"

Jesse looks at me, blunt in hand, and wears a smug look. "Tell me, why should I share another sacred puff with a liar?"

"C'mon man, I got you a taco a couple weeks ago."

He recoils in what looks like genuine disgust, "People like you, those who only help others out of desire to serve their own self interest, tsk tsk. You people are what's wrong with America, with the world, and I don't smoke with agents of Satan." This actual bum I swear.

He takes a drag, “I will only share it with you on one condition: you be real with me, if only because I’m so curious what y’all think about this whole recent shit going on.”
He begins to change the music as Alan pulls out a couple of premixed drinks, flavored to taste like vodka and orange juice—I forget what that’s exactly called since I swear I’m not a regular drinker. A screwball? I don’t know.
He looks at me, “Well?”

“You ain’t ask the fucking question.” I reply.

“Oh right right, well, assuming the crazy christians are right and all these people disappeared because god found them worthy and took them to heaven, why ain’t god find you worthy? In other words, what sin have you committed that has barred you from salvation, oh brother sir?”

I pause for a moment, and swallow, “Man, I don’t know, I like men, last I checked that would do it.”

“Ain’t no way, I know your Bullshit face now man you can’t try that shit on me and expect me to believe it.” He places extra emphasis as he says, “You don’t even believe that shit, and I know like three gayer guys who have burdened this planet with a lack of their absence.”

He takes a swig of his drink, motions for Alan to pass me one, and passes the blunt to him too.

He stares out the window, drums along to the song, and sighs as he begins to talk.

“Me, I know why. When I was a little kid I remember the night my dad died. My mom had just bailed him out and they were celebrating, he was out at the gas station picking up some chips and beer when they shot him dead. The cops told my mother so coldly how he was dead on the scene, and I remember so clearly how one of them spoke with a lisp that the other one would always smile at as he said ‘suspects are already in custody.” He takes another swig, “Didn’t take long for him to get out either, and one day when I was 15, I had enough. Since that day my mother ain’t sing and dance as she did the dishes the same, ever since she would always talk as though it hurt, and she would always stay up on Sunday nights, still expecting my dad to come home buzzed and pissed off his team lost. I decided that it wasn’t

enough to take his life, shit is just a cycle that way, so I figured hey, kill my dad, I kill your son. Ran up on him, dumped a full clip, he ain't even have a chance to ask what was happening."
Jesus christ.

"I heard when his dad arrived on the scene he was clutching his son's lifeless body and begging him to wake up as his brains leaked out of his skull. I don't feel any better now though, my dad's still dead, my mom is still missing him, and I feel only more angry now knowing the one solution I thought of didn't do shit. So if what's happened was salvation, I can understand why I ain't go with my mom. Some random kid who had a stupid fuck of a dad died because another idiot couldn't think of anything better."

Silence fills the car as he looks into the sky, trying to find his parents among the clouds.

"You ain't gotta worry about me judging you David, I just want you to be real with me, as a friend."

Alan takes a swig from his bottle and says he'll even tell us what he thinks his grave sin is. He goes on this tangent about how lust has controlled him and how weak he is against it. We try to tell him there's nothing wrong with masturbating but all that porn probably isn't good for him but he tells us how last night his sister didn't start the washer and he took her bra and masturbated while sniffing them just because he hasn't smelled a woman in so long. He yells out that he is less than a man and a beast yet cries that that shouldn't disqualify him from salvation, wishing he had the strength to wear the cross and abide by it.

Both Jesse and I are disgusted by this, with him responding for me with, "Man I'll judge that that's fucking foul. I hope your ass ain't ever go where I'm going now." He begins laughing, "Man they better have a special place for sexpests like you dawg."

He turns to me, "Yours can't be worse David, deadass if it is I'll walk out this car right now; I don't wanna be hanging with perverts."

"It ain't."

"So spill."

"Can I take a hit first?"

"Fine, but you better be honest."

He passes me the blunt, still lit, still burning away and hotboxing us all the same.

I take my drag, dreading this all the same, and as I do, a blinding light shines through nowhere and clouds the world, suddenly I look into it, my eyes adjust, and I see it for another spotlight upon the stage that the world rests upon. I see the faceless yet infinite crowd to my right, and if I look past Alan and Jesse pretending to sit in a car I can see the backdrop stretch until obscurity, I feel that if I tried hard enough I could probably see China, just over their shoulders.

I take a deep breath, and as I do, music picks up. I know what I'm supposed to say, as much as I don't want to. A large part of me is certain that this policy of honesty isn't going to be the best, but there's an idiot ape within my human shell that unfortunately believes in stupid concepts like honor, and it howls and shrieks, about to burst forth from my chest. It's one of those things that I've been meaning to do, not just for my honor or whatever, but as a matter of general principle. Taking responsibility and moving on with my life. I always worried this day would come. I was always thinking that when I died and got to this bigass courtroom in the sky, I would be put on trial and my heart put onto one of the scales and I wouldn't be able to convince the jury that I'm a decent person. They look at me and Jesse mouths 'Line!' The one that weaves the world–The Creator, speaks through me, and I begin on beat.

Like spiders eat their mothers,
And how the good die,
I've lived life as another,
I confess my lie.
Wilted leaves and greying skies,
Idiotic choice,
Done in vain to quell the why's—
Existential noise.
March fifteenth, day of sorrow,
He would not see tomorrow.

Perverse inversion of birth—
Two enter, one leaves.
His body left with no mirth,
And I didn't grieve.
I only thought of myself,
He could have been saved,
But I only thought of myself.
And I left him.
He could have been saved,
But no—he wasn't.

Slowly breathing his final breaths in his vomit and piss as he begged me to do anything or grab his mom.
I don't know what rhymes with grab his mom, I don't know how else to say I let a boy my age get laced and die when I was 17 and all I did was watch and leave because I was too scared to get in trouble.
I don't think it's right to rhyme about the fact that he died and I don't think what I did was right either.
I think I'm unworthy of a good life. I think for my sins I should be barred from paradise or whatever is out there when I die.
I think that I don't deserve this life and I hate myself for being so depressed all the time and wasting my years of life when he's in the ground—dead.

I wish my parents were still here—
Tell me what to do.
Even my dad, could take reigns—steer.
Tell me what to do.
But two people revered gods,
Are still just human.
With skin and bone, blood and flaws,
They are still human.
Only know as much as me,
And cursed with mortality.

Filament that holds the sky,
Giants in the wastes.

Long dead gods, as the earth sighs,
Twist beneath plates.
Willow woods and lichen logs,
Sapphire oceans,
Singing birds and sleeping dogs,
Life in motion.
The sun will rise and it will set,
Even after final breath.

Wasted opportunity,
My life spent skulking,
Soul and self disunity.
I am revolting.
A hairless chimp with free will,
An ocean of chance,
Yet I live; do nothing still,
When I should go dance.
Live my life and speak my truth,
In honor of once lost youth.

A world rests just out of reach,
It's always been there,
Through the silence, hear it preach.
Listen to its share.
A swan song for my old life,
As confession ends,
Forgive me earth, for my strife—
My facade now rend.
Life is hard.
But so'am I.

I stand alone on stage, I didn't even realize that all lighting save for the spotlight on me went out, and I stand brightly lit in front of this faceless horde, their faces a spiral of color and shapes that look like something, but if I try to think about it my head begins to spin. The spotlight shines brighter and blinds me once more, and before I even have time to notice what

the hell is happening, I'm back in Jesse's backseat, blunt smoked down to the roach.

"Jesus Christ man." Jesse says, breaking the awkward silence.

"I didn't wanna talk about it for a reason, it's not even everything, but now that the truth is out..." I think really hard about what I'm about to say next. "I think I want to live a better life, I don't know if I'm really gonna turn to god or some shit but something's gotta change. I have to just live my life. The fact that I've been using his death as an excuse to wallow in my own self-defeating prophecy does more to disrespect him than it does help me."

"Oh yeah?" He asks, concern blistering on his face. "That ain't what's got me shocked."

"What is it then?"

He's trying to make the situation less awkward, "You're always posting on your story about smoking Copernicus moon rocks or some shit, yet here you are smoking what's easily mid, tweaking the fuck out in my backseat man." He says this with more worry that he'll upset me, but still tries to break the awkward air. "We just got this strain too, Alan and I had a crazy ass time getting it but we'll tell you about that later, shit's got him nonverbal."

I put it out and wipe ash off myself, I look at both of them.

Alan breaks his silence, reminding me he's even in this car, "Well..." He says, drearily.

I think about this next sentence and realize I'm about to answer his question with potentially my decision upon which path I will go down, where I will take my life, and what I may become.

The sky is an intense shade of blue that feels as though it has never been this blue before, my eyes water trying to take it all in. An oboe rises through the crescendo, a single note that hangs unwavering until a clarinet takes over. There is such an unfulfillable longing within this noise that my mind scrambles trying to think of how to quell this hunger, through food, drink,

sleep, or sex; yet there is no way to do so, it is as though this was the voice of God singing to the Earth in a calm lullaby, or maybe to wake it up. It is the call to the front, a spell to rekindle the flame within, chanted by dark sorcerors and holy clerics alike. As it is, all colors seem more vibrant, forcing themselves into my eyes in a blitzkrieg like march. Forcing my eyes and my body to behold the world that I not only exist upon, that I not only come from, but the world that I happily would admit that I am of now. If I may be so crass, it feels like I just came in my pants. I check real quick to make sure I don't have a wet spot. I see the universe, and I think it sees me. I look to the sky trying to spot the eyes looking down and seeing me, but all I can see is the sun. "What now?"